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VOLUME 9 ISSUE 2

MAY 2006

SOUTH AFRICA'S LEADING COMPUTER GAMING & TECHNOLOGY MAGAZINE

NAG

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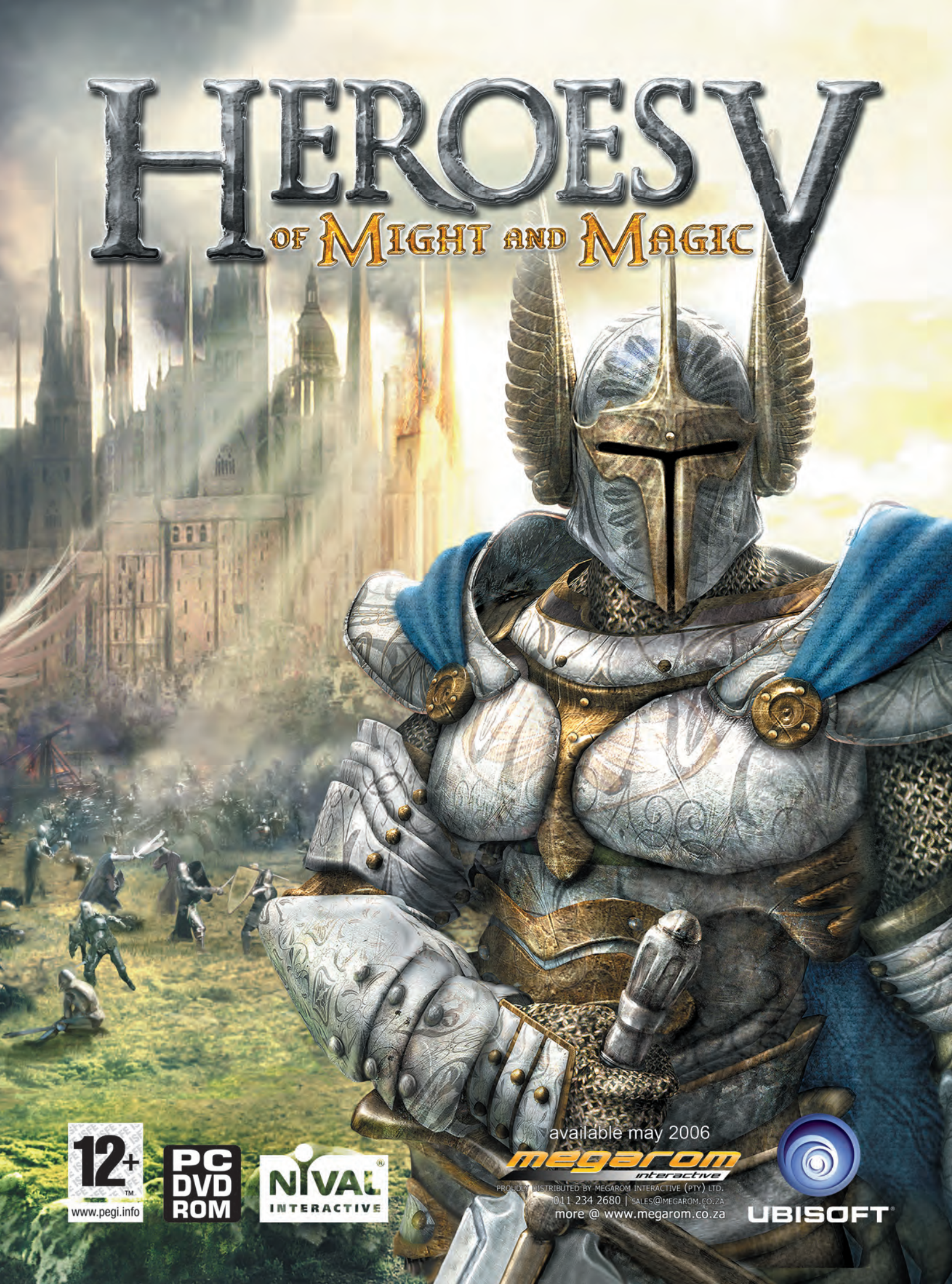
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UBISOFT



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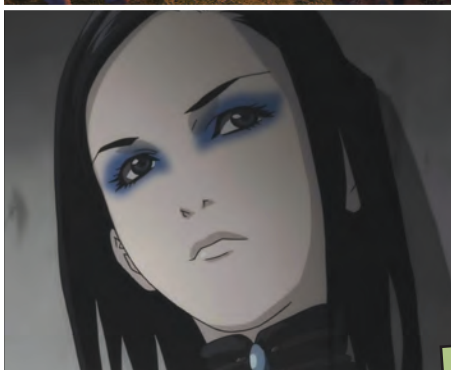
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SiN is back! Somehow that doesn't make the impact it should, but that's mostly thanks to the game dropping the ball years ago. SiN has in a sense become an industry what-if. What if the final wasn't buggy as hell? What if the patches came out quicker? What if Half-Life was released at another stage? This time we'll find out, since Ritual has decided to resurrect the game in episodic format. It doesn't feel like that long ago – and it probably isn't – when Valve started talking shop with Steam about episodic content. Then the service launched with a lot of controversy, but as bandwidth increased and bugs got less, Steam became a formidable force and is making a growing impression on retail. It was enough to make Vivendi rightly (but foolishly) take Valve to court. EA isn't making the same mistake, which is evident from the announcement that it will be distributing the boxed version of SiN Emergence.

So, big publishers are embracing the model and several are already jumping on board. Both Microsoft's Live service and the online support planned for the Revolution's Virtual Console are aiming at home-grown and independent developers who need a cost-effective and broad platform to get their games out on. Titles like Darwinia, Geometry Wars, Rag Doll Kung-Fu and Bone have done well using online distribution models (though I'd really like to see Telltale move its games onto Live for that extra bit of exposure). So if you were decrying the future of online distribution in the past, you probably have changed your tune by now.

But this isn't going to be the only future. Much like movies, games are increasing in size as their technological quality expand. It might seem practical to download half a gig for a game on most lines, but what about games that will pack the upcoming HD-DVD and Blu-Ray discs rim to rim? Obviously those won't be available on a download service any time soon (and if they did appear, let's hope you would have that one gigabit line running into your house). So, for the foreseeable future, online games and boxed versions are going to compete for attention. Let's also not forget that people like boxed copies. Sure, it's great that you can get your HL2 purchase off Steam, but owning the box, even if it sits in storage somewhere, still makes us feel comfortable.

How long will it be before that paradigm changes, when we treat triple-A PC and console games with the same disposable attitude that my mobile games seem to get? Probably not that long – a generation at most. Why go out and get the boxed copy when you can download it in seconds instead? But we're not there yet.

James Francis [Editor]



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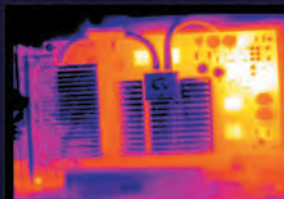


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Thermal Distribution Chart (Back-side)

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LETTER OF THE MOMENT

FROM: Josh Fisher

SUBJECT: Copyright isn't being taken seriously

What's up with copyright these days? It just isn't being taken seriously. I'm mainly referring to younger gamers and music listeners. It's just become so easy to copy DVDs, games, music, etc. with software like Alcohol 120%, Nero and so on. People should respect the guys who make the games for a living. People spend lots of time creating games for our personal pleasure and some people just rip them off and don't give them any respect. With music it's even worse: millions of songs are probably stolen every single day. What if your favourite artist found out that you were copying their music - imagine what they'd think of you. People have even been arrested for doing these things. I mean, how would you feel if you had spent months on developing a game and all your sales are lost because everybody copied it from a friend? Just support the guys who work for your pleasure and interests.

Yes, piracy is a bad thing. I don't think it takes a lot to explain to people that when someone takes something from you without paying, it is stealing. And local piracy does hurt the local industry. A lot of gamers say they just nab a copy from a mate to check the game out, but a shocking amount of players purchase black market goods

from flea markets and roadsides. Still, there is the other problem: cost. I don't think the local companies can honestly expect South African gamers to afford the local hardware and software legally all the time. Game prices have definitely come down (and have been historically low over the past few years), so the real culprits are hardware prices and some console titles. But you should also consider another side to the argument. Firstly, a lot of music groups have gained fans through casual piracy. Secondly, while piracy yields large losses on end-of-year financial statements, it's a lot harder to get any concrete evidence that piracy affects sales overall. For instance, research from The Leading Question shows that music pirates in the UK buy up to four times as much music as non-pirates. The claims that piracy led to slumps in sales were, in hindsight, the music industry's own scapegoat to explain sliding sales, thanks to lacklustre products and a jaded audience. Think about it: if digital piracy is doing so much damage, how did legal digital downloads experience such an explosive growth? This topic will be debated a lot more, but if anything, the new wave of piracy has firstly showed the scale at which people steal copyrighted works, and secondly exposed myths and exploitation by legitimate industries of piracy as its main villain. But as much as piracy is illegal, is it right that companies enforce artificial regions on games and movies?



The 'Letter of the Moment' prize is sponsored by EA South Africa. The winner receives two games for coming up with the most eclectic chicken scratch.

IMPORTANT STUFF! PAY ATTENTION!

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Cyber mail: letters@mag.co.za

Important: Include your details when mailing us or how will you ever get your prize if you win...

TOPIC FOR NEXT MONTH:

Are episodic games the future of distribution?

FROM: Wolf

SUBJECT: Games & Jedi

I was playing Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic the other day and it made me wonder. When is Knights of the old Republic III coming out and would it not be cool being a Jedi? Then I thought.... we are Jedi, in our own way.... we people who spend countless hours playing a game... think about it... The Jedi believe in the Force. We believe in the 'Code'. The Code uses game developers to create the games we play. Some use the 'Code' to create games, some use it to cheat. Some Jedi are Jedi Warriors and Sentinels or even Counsellors. Some gamers are FPS gamers and some are RTS gamers. The Jedi have fancy weaponry. The Code uses

developers to create our weapons of defence and attack... our mouse and keyboard. Some use gamepads, joysticks and gaming wheels. Our keyboards and mice differ from each other because not all gamers are the same. We must be proud of ourselves. We have a talent to play games that are very difficult. Some just don't understand the concept of an FPS game, but they are good at something else. We are talented at what we do. Then some gamers are Gaming Reviewers who guide us. Now there is the light side and the dark side. The light side is people who play real and original games. Dark side is people who write games illegally and jokes about people playing games. "These things lead to the dark side!" They

may call us nerds, but we will show them... We may not be Jedi... we are Gamers. So, to all gamers out there... stand up for yourself and your talent. We are good at what we do, believe it! "May the Code be with you!"

Okay, I chose this specific letter to pick a fight with Star Wars fans. I think the whole thing is over-rated, and I'm not just referring to the last three releases. If I have it correct (or at least from the mouth of Yoda) there are only two Sith at a given point: a master and an apprentice. So, basically one Sith and his henchman (who changes with every one of the first three episodes) manage to kick an ancient order off the throne. The Force Be With You, indeed. Star Wars was George Lucas' excuse to get fantasy into sci-fi. Beyond that we could have just called A New Hope and onwards the Adventures of Han Solo, because everyone thought Luke was a dweeb. On top of that, the Dark Side has much better powers. What on earth is the point of lifting a ship out of the swamp when you can choke the local wildlife to do it for you? The clincher is that if the citizens of the galaxy far, far away just took a moment and exiled every Sith and Jedi in reach, they would have much more peaceful lives. The world already has its criminals and trade barons. Who needs a bunch of monks with a penchant for drama running around the scene?

What are Jedi good for?
Pit fights at Jabba's pad in the Keys



FROM: Morgan Grant

SUBJECT: Game Dreams

First off, let me say that I am a first-person shooter fanatic, but I also really enjoyed playing GTA: San Andreas. I thoroughly enjoyed playing F.E.A.R., which brings me to my point... imagine a game set in the cities of San Andreas, also third-person, but it uses a collage of game engines. Like a Doom, F.E.A.R. or Half-Life source engine for character/model animations and/or physics, and EA Games' NFS engine for use of amazing car/bike/plane/chopper/etc. visuals. Imagine a game where you walk around in a world with extreme bump-mapped textures for completely everything. I know that's a bit farfetched because I understand that you would probably need two 4GB GeForce 9950 GTR X Ultra's in SLI with something like 256-pixel pipelines each. I think that EA, id Software, Valve and all the other big game title creators should get together, have a few drinks and join forces to create something to that effect. I think every gamer on this planet will appreciate the end product. I certainly will! Oh well, we all have ours dreams don't we?

What you really want, then, is for various game designers to get together. The engines involved get all the attention, but it has little to do with how a game looks. It just gives the developer the capability to do certain things with a certain ease. How a game looks, plays and feels come down to the design. In that case, we all have our dream combinations, like Hideo Kojima working with the Splinter Cell guys. Besides, in terms of engines, it's already happening with everyone using RenderWare.

FROM: Jan Steyn

SUBJECT: Music on the DVD

Why don't you guys also add some cool music on the cover DVD? Or would Musica and other stores grab their torches and pitchforks and tear up the NAG office? But there has to be some free cool music for gaming somewhere!

What exactly is 'cool music for gaming'? I can answer that, but then you know the answer: most music is copyrighted and can't be placed on our cover DVD. Some stuff, though it can be distributed, can't be placed on something commercial, like a cover

DVD. Yes, the DVD is free but we still sell the magazine. There are free songs out there, but would you prefer us wasting space on that or using the space for game demos and trailers instead? Why not get all your mates to install iTunes, and then you can listen to each other's collections while playing. Or buy a 360, where most games allow you to change from the soundtrack to your own collection.

FROM: Leon du Plessis

SUBJECT: Short Games

I have been playing games for about 18 years, and loved every moment. But I am beginning to notice an alarming new development. Games are short. Very short. I think the first game I really had a gripe with was Max Payne 2. Others that stand out are Warhammer: Dawn of War (only one single-player campaign? What the heck?), God of War (a brilliant game, that lasted all of eight hours, including all unlockables), King Kong, Genji, even Half-Life 2, which really ticked me off.

All the games were great fun, but not worth the money I paid for them. I try to get a new game once a month, and it sucks big time if you finish the games on one Saturday. If you consider there are games out there like GTA: SA, Final Fantasy X and Xenosaga 2, it seems a bit unfair to charge the same price. Even though some shops allow you to swap games now, it still bites to shell out R500 for one day's entertainment. The only way to make the games last seems to be upping the difficulty (usually with frustrating results, as some of the games are extremely difficult), or going to multiplayer, which is not always an option. I now carefully research each game on the Internet before I buy, and save myself about R3,000 by not buying short games. Of course, this limits the choices severely. I realise you can only fit so much info on a disc, but I would rather play a game with bad graphics that gives me value for money and a good two weeks of entertainment, than spend a fortune on a few hours of eye-candy. That's what the Internet is for.

It's the old nugget, isn't it? Quantity and quality often are seen as going hand-in-hand when it comes to games, probably because years ago sprites and 2D coding routines were much simpler. Gamers

were also less demanding, so most games didn't aim for a huge amount of variation. Things evolved, though. Today's games are technically much more involved than ever before. There's also the emergence of the new gaming audience. A movie usually isn't more than two hours (three hours are rare for most movies and used fairly rarely). Now imagine a person used to that span of entertainment playing a game that demands 20+ hours to finish. It definitely doesn't feel worth the money, but a game like God of War shows every cent that went into it. Alternatively you can pay much less for more incredibly vast games like Weird Encounters in Infinite Space. In terms of indie-development, there are many games that cost little and last long. Sadly, the restrictions that come from both the more complicated hardware and a more mainstream gaming audience are going to take a toll for hardcore fans.

Would he look as smug if he knew how short Max Payne 2 is?



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ONE ZBOARD TO RULE THEM ALL

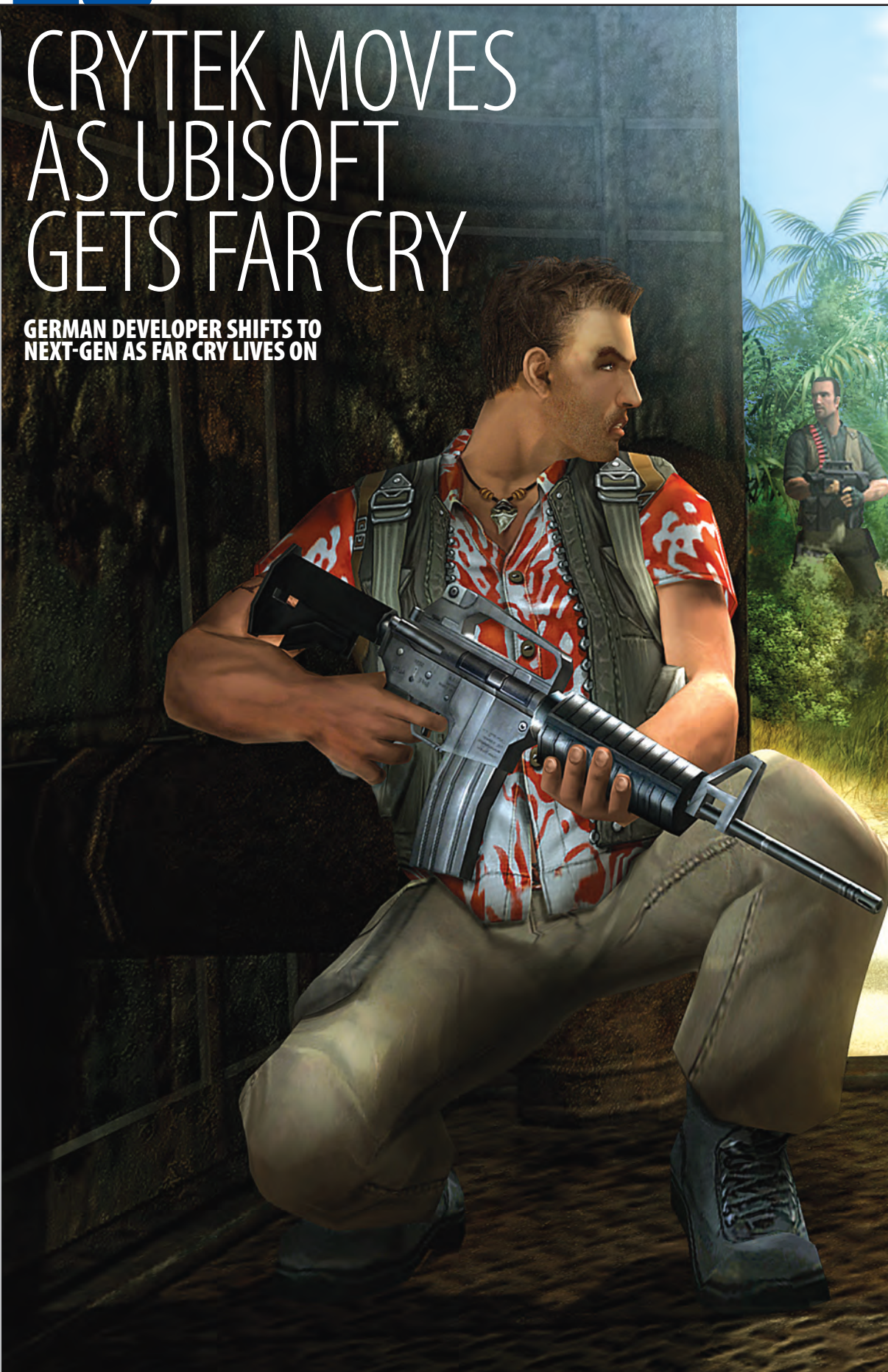
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CRYTEK MOVES AS UBISOFT GETS FAR CRY

GERMAN DEVELOPER SHIFTS TO
NEXT-GEN AS FAR CRY LIVES ON





Could you make the right decision when all hell is breaking loose?

Titles like the Far Cry Instincts series have proven popular

IT'S BEEN A BUSY period for Crytek, the developer behind Far Cry and its equally famous engine CryEngine. First EA announced that the team was working on the new game, one the publishing giant will handle. Far Cry and its two sequels have been published by Ubisoft. Crytek didn't talk about this move away from the French company, though it isn't uncommon for a studio to work with more than one publisher. Lionhead publishes games under both EA and Activision.

"Our focus has always been on innovating gameplay and technology, and bringing new experiences to gamers through our original intellectual properties," said Cevat Yerli, CEO and President of Crytek. "Crysis will be a showcase for that commitment and will offer gamers from all over the world the next step in FPS gaming." Crysis, the upcoming sci-fi shooter, is about man's survival against an invading alien force. The trailer and tech demo release has wowed attendees at GDC, and caused a stir last seen when id Software and Valve unveiled their engines.

But this hasn't left Ubisoft out in the cold. The publisher secured the rights to Far Cry – all of the rights. The agreement sees Ubisoft taking complete control of the Far Cry IP, including future games, characters and any spin-offs. It also has a perpetual license to the Crytek Far Cry engine, but not CryEngine 2, the beast behind the Crysis demo. The move isn't a devastating one to Crytek, since the past two iterations of Far Cry, Predator and Instincts, came from internal Ubisoft developers. But it also means that a Far Cry 2 isn't likely to happen under Crytek and that fans are likely to look at Crysis as the spiritual sequel. It also opens the Far Cry engine up for use in other Ubisoft games.

"With Far Cry, we look forward to further consolidate our leading position in the first-person shooters genre," said Yves Guillemot, President and CEO of Ubisoft Entertainment. While we don't share his opinion of Ubisoft being the FPS leader, the Far Cry engine will definitely bring some interesting titles from the French publisher.

Crytek took its next title, Crysis, to EA



SOCOM 3 - PS2



SOCOM Fireteam Bravo - PSP

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PlayStation 2



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SNIPPETS

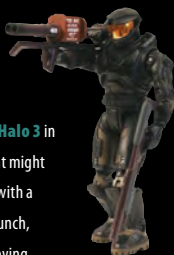
YOUR ESSENTIAL INFO, NOW IN BITE-SIZED PORTIONS!

It appears that the days of the **UMD movie** is numbered. Both Paramount and Universal have stopped producing titles for the format, while there are rumours of Wal-Mart planning to drop the category. Sony has announced a peripheral that will link the PSP to a TV, but it might be too late.



The annual IGF awards held this year included a section for community mods. **Dystopia** won the best Half-Life 2 mod, while Path of Vengeance won in the UT 2004 category. **Rose Of Eternity** was voted the best Neverwinter Nights mod and the best Doom 3 mod went to Last Man Standing Co-Op.

Rumour has it that Microsoft plans to launch **Halo 3** in March 2007. That might have coincided with a PlayStation 3 launch, though Sony is eying November for a worldwide launch. Microsoft declined to comment.



Apparently DS owners can expect the release of **Opera**'s browser for the handheld in December. Nintendo hasn't confirmed this, only saying that the software will be out before the end of the year.



EPIC PLANS BIG WITH UE3

200 TITLES IN ITS LIFESPAN

"WITH UNREAL ENGINE 3, we designed it to fall in the sweet spot of next-generation consoles," said Mark Rein, vice president of Epic. "We've been really in tune with the next-generation consoles this time around." The developer is not kidding. Apparently the Unreal 3 Engine cost \$40 million to develop. But Epic expects to make this money back with ease as it makes a concerted effort for the next-generation. In the past, Epic's engines have been very popular on the PC, but consoles have proven a different challenge with the most success happening on the Xbox. But UE3 has been designed from the ground up to work on the new platforms and to be easy and efficient for developers. It's all part of Epic's shift towards more middleware support. Similar to Criterion, the company still dabbles in games, but its engines are the future. The same market keeps churning over a healthy profit for rival id Software.

Around sixty titles that used the Unreal Engine 2 were published, so where is Epic's sights set now? "I expect by the time Unreal Engine 3 is dead and buried, we'll ship 200 titles



[sic]. Maybe 300," said Rein. The company is already hard at work on UE4 and plans to enhance and expand UE3 for the next four to five years. It's the engine that it hopes will make 'Epic' a word in the gaming mainstream.

PSP HACKS

O'Reilly has published 'PSP Hacks', a book which contains fifty useful tweaks and how-tos for your PSP. Items covered include surfing the Web, reading eb comics and RSS feeds, syncing an

address book to your PSP, chatting in IRC and writing your own applications using JavaScript and Lua.

[www.oreilly.com]



PlayStation 2

UNLOCK THE CODE ...



DARWINIA WINS BIG AT THE IGF

INTROVERSION, THE INDEPENDENT DEVELOPER behind Darwinia, kept the European indie flag flying when it won three awards during the Independent Game Festival ceremony, held at the Game Developer Conference this year. The company walked away with awards for Technical Excellence, Innovation in Audio and the Seamus McNally Grand Prize of \$20,000 - all for the RTS Darwinia.

Introversion expressed its surprise at winning three awards - the game was nominated for four in total. "It's truly awesome, I'm still in shock. We never realised that Darwinia had achieved such a following, especially in the USA. I think we have to thank Valve for their part in making our game available to the US audience," said Thomas Arundel, co-founder. Darwinia was added to Valve's online distribution service in December last year, and has enjoyed considerable success since then.

Other winners were Number None's time-manipulation platform title Braid, for Innovation in Game Design, while Weird World: Return To Infinite Space, Digital Eel's sequel to last year's sensation, was awarded for Innovation in Audio. The quirky Flash-based MMO Dofus won the Audience Award.

STARCRAFT: GHOST CANCELLED

THE ACTION-ORIENTATED STARCRAFT SPIN-OFF, Ghost, has certainly had a colourful history. Shunted from developer to developer, it seems Blizzard just can't decide what to do with it. Now, Blizzard has decided to "... indefinitely postpone production" on StarCraft: Ghost. Blizzard is busy "... evaluating opportunities for utilising the additional power of the new and upcoming console systems."

President and co-founder Mike Morhaime commented that Blizzard has been impressed with the potential of consoles such as the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3. "In addition to allowing us to determine the best course for StarCraft: Ghost, this review period will help us lay the groundwork for our future console games."

Originally announced at the Tokyo Game Show in 2002, StarCraft: Ghost was at that stage being developed by Nihilistic Software. In July 2004, Blizzard announced that Nihilistic had "... completed its contribution," and then handed the development to Swingin' Ape Studios, which was later bought by Blizzard.

It looks like StarCraft: Ghost may never see the light of day, just like the much-anticipated Warcraft: Lord of the Clans.



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www.riseandfallgame.com



www.PlayStation.co.za

www.gameplay.co.za

Someone has filed a class action lawsuit against **Ubisoft** for using **Starforce**, the notorious anti-piracy software that created security flaws in some systems. The complainant seeks \$5 million in damages for installing dangerous software on machines. Personally we think it's daft. It'll be enough if Ubisoft just stops using Starforce.



SCI, the new owners of Eidos, has announced that getting the new **Tomb Raider** onto the market has pushed the company's finances into the red for the first half of this year. But it expects to make a healthy profit later in 2006.



PLAYSTATION 3 TO BE LAUNCHED GLOBALLY

AFTER A RECENT PRESS conference held in Japan to clear the air surrounding Sony's absent next-generations console, quite a few facts were revealed.

The price of the PlayStation 2 won't be dropping once the PlayStation 3 is released, according to Sony. The PlayStation 2 will still sell for \$149. Sony has made it clear that it will launch the PS3 worldwide in November. Sony had originally promised an April launch.

The PS3 will be 100% backwards compatible with PS2 games, via emulation. Sony also reiterated that the PS3 runs on Linux and that PS3 games will be Blu-ray-only to prevent piracy.

Very little was said about Sony's online plans, though the inclusion of 'Online Lobby' and 'Voice-Chat' was mentioned. With Xbox Live taking large chunks of the online gaming market share while the PS3 remains absent, Sony will have to work hard to regain ground lost to Microsoft.

The main news for some at the press conference was that the PS3 development kits, used in the production of



PS3 games, are only shipping in June. This means developers only have five months in which to reprogram their games for the PlayStation 3. The June development kit news also signifies that Sony knew it would never have a spring launch, as Sony admitted that it had only planned to send out development kits in June since the start.

Finally, Sony made it clear that the PlayStation 3 will not cost less than around \$450, but will come bundled with a 60GB hard drive (40GB more than the bundled hard drive that bundles with the Xbox 360 Premium).

FREE GAME OF THE MONTH

MODERN WAR 3

URL: www.anubis.com.ru/mw3

GENRE: Mindless shooting

SIZE: 3MB (on the DVD)

NOT ALL GAMES NEED to be complex immersive sandbox experiences where your actions carve a path through moral rights and wrongs. Sometimes, just clicking your mouse and killing soldiers is good enough.

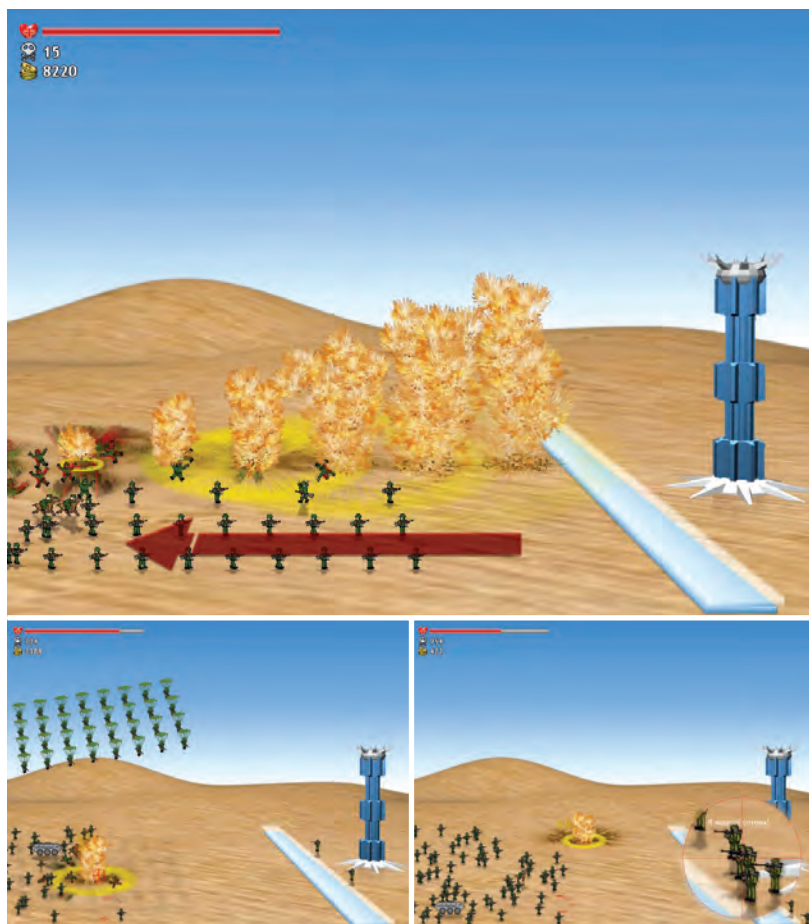
Modern War 3 is a basic 'click on things to shoot them' type game, but finely balanced with power-ups to keep things interesting.

In essence, you have a tower you must defend while hordes of soldiers, horse riders and tanks assault the tower. Tanks are tougher, requiring more clicks. Soldiers are one-shot kills.

As you progress, you gain cash with which to purchase upgrades or help. You can use your cash to fire your tower's mini-gun to great effect, or purchase and air strike. You can also hire soldiers of your own, who will pick off enemies at random.

The game has no real end *per se*. You simply progress until you can't anymore. You can finish a level by killing enough soldiers, but on 'Medium' difficulty that's no easy task. As the soldiers get closer, they start shooting your soldiers. If one of them touches the barrier in front of the tower, you lose health. Health gone, game over!

Sure, the experience only lasts about an hour maximum, but while you're there in the thick of it, Modern War 3 is a fun little distraction from the mundane.





LARA CROFT VISITS THE LOST CITY

WORLD WEB ENTERTAINMENT, A local computer games distributor, recently introduced the latest Lara Croft title, Tomb Raider: Legend, to members of the press at the appropriately chosen Lost City in Sun City. Complete with dancers, laser 'guns' and a sexy Lara Croft look-alike, guests were treated to a legendary evening of entertainment, tomb raider style.

Guest of honour at the lavish event was Justin Gaffney (Head of International Sales) from Eidos in the UK.

This new chapter in Lara's chronicles boasts a number of enhancements, including a vastly improved polygon count, a more sophisticated physics engine that is instrumental in solving the game's many puzzles and greater freedom of movement, including a broader repertoire of possible moves and actions. However, fans of the original game, particularly those who feel that the franchise has strayed from its roots of late, will be particularly pleased to discover that this new episode returns to the original philosophy, despite the new features. In fact, Toby Gard, the original creator of Lara Croft, a name that is known to about 94% of computer gamers, has been crucial in the development of Tomb Raider: Legend.

The game is available locally on PC and PlayStation.

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA STATUES

Nintendo has approved licensing rights to create statues based on The Legend of Zelda franchise.

"We are very excited to be working with Nintendo on the Legend of Zelda brand. The franchise has clearly stood the test of time, having just celebrated its 20th Anniversary," says Alex Davis, director of First 4 Figures. "We will be mainly concentrating on doing statues based on the games The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, The Legend of Zelda: Majora's Mask, and The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess."

The 9 to 12 inch tall statues will make their debut on the Nintendo stand at E3 in May and will be available towards the end of the year.



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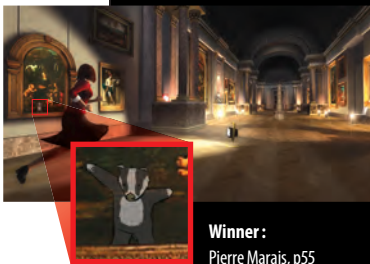
more @ www.megarom.co.za



BADGER HUNT

Each month we choose a cunning hiding place in the magazine for our badger friend. This might be in a screenshot, on a piece of artwork or anywhere, really. We'll announce a random winner and that person will get a cool prize sponsored by our new best friends [see above]. Send your badger spotting to this address [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject line [May Badger].

LAST MONTH'S HUNT



Winner:
Pierre Marais, p55

ADULTS GAME MORE THAN TEENS

A recent study by the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA) has revealed that adults spend more time playing games than teens.

One-third of adult gamers spend ten hours or more per week playing console or PC games, compared to just 11% of teens.

Other findings include:

- 25% of adults used handhelds in the last six months;
- 64% of adults play alone;
- 55% of adults play online;
- Five times more teens are playing MMOs than adults, especially women.



NITRO RACING WHEEL

THE NITRO RACING WHEEL, officially licensed from Microsoft, has been designed by Joytech for use with the Xbox 360. It features a Dual Bearing Management System which is said to provide robust, highly realistic steering, mimicking the genuine driving sensation with more accuracy. The built-in Digital Display and Analog LED Throttle Indicator provide continuous performance data and the integrated Digital Stopwatch allows for monitoring and perfecting lap time performances. Additional features include the Sequential Gear Stick and F1-style Butterfly Paddles for quick access to gear changes, full rubber Wheel Head that provides a comfortable grip at all times and a non-slip, centrally-pivoted Pedal Set that delivers accurate and comfortable control. The Nitro Racing Wheel also features an Integrated Headset-Port and illuminated Xbox Guide Button for instant access to the Xbox 360 Dashboard. [www.joytech.net]

SEGA REVOLUTIONS

Nintendo's Revolution, love it or hate it, is starting to put together a rather nice collection of downloadable games for its Virtual Console system. The Virtual Console will allow Revolution owners to download and play classic NES, SNES, N64 and now SEGA Genesis titles through the download service. SEGA plans to provide a 'best of' selection of games.

"SEGA continues to develop innovative ways to showcase its new generation leadership," stated Naoya Tsurumi, Chief Executive Officer, SEGA of America Inc. and SEGA Europe, Ltd. "SEGA's support of the Virtual Console system will introduce more gamers to classic Genesis hits and reinvigorate many of our popular brands."

There hasn't been any information if these downloadable titles will be playable over the broadband gaming network Nintendo plans to provide.



THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II LIMITED EDITION KEYSSET

IDEAZON, DESIGNER AND DEVELOPER of the Zboard, has announced its new custom keyset.

"Whenever we talk to Zboard owners, they tell us that they can get into game strategy faster with a Limited Edition Keyset," says Chris Rathgeber, President of Ideazon Inc. "We've worked closely with EA to create the The Lord

of the Rings, The Battle for Middle-earth II Keyset for Zboard and we know gamers will love it."

The Lord of the Rings, The Battle for Middle-earth II keyset is said to shorten the learning curve of the game by offering a customised control layout. [www.zboard.com]

CAPTION OF THE MONTH

EVERY MONTH WE'LL CHOOSE a boring, odd or peculiar screenshot from any random game and write a bad caption for it. Your job is to come up with a better (funny) caption. The winner will get a free game from Vivendi Universal Games. Send your captions to [ed@nag.co.za] with the subject [May Caption].



MAY CONTEST

NAG'S LAME

ATTEMPT:

"For some reason he couldn't explain, Steve's method of lobster catching wasn't working."



APRIL WINNER

"After playing through 50 Cent: Bulletproof, a very angry Agent 47 does the world a favor and makes sure the rapper will never be able to produce a sequel."

— Steven Blomkamp

RULES: (1) If you don't use the correct subject line, your mail will be automatically filtered by our spam software and deleted. (2) If you think sending in 20 captions for the same screenshot is how you want to play the system, then put them all in the same mail or we'll keep the top one and delete the rest. You probably won't win anyway because you can't follow simple instructions. And people who can't follow simple instructions don't deserve to win things. (3) Obey all posted speed limits. (4) Never run with scissors. (5) There is no spoon.

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RAZER BARRACUDA HP-1 GAMING HEADPHONES

USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH the Razer Barracuda AC-1 gaming soundcard, the Barracuda HP-1's audio will deliver "the best gaming audio experience in the world today". The built-in microphone has been designed specifically for in-game communications and the speaker drivers can deliver pinpoint positional accuracy, which is essential for maintaining that winning edge in gaming. The use of 99% oxygen-free copper cable will also ensure gaming audio signal purity.

[www.razerzone.com]



R 199 - MAY 06



Vivisector: Beast Inside

This title is a unique mixture of 3D Action/Horror that blends an immersive interactive story with intense, high-adrenaline action. In the year 1878, a mysterious doctor built a laboratory on the remote Soreo Isle and started his experiments on human/animal hybrid genetics, violating the very foundations of nature. His work was aimed at the creation of animals that look, feel and behave more like humans. He created bizarre never-before seen creatures, ModBeasts, Humanimals and Brutes, each kind with unique abilities, tactics and firepower.



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A new version of the emulation software **DOSBox** has been released (dosbox.sourceforge.net). There are a host of changes that will make playing old DOS games in a Windows environment a lot easier. And it only took two and a half years for a new version...



Rockstar North, the non-handheld side of the Rockstar Empire, has started hiring network programmers for a future title. Thus, speculation of an **online-capable GTA** has been stirred, though the developer remains quiet about its future GTA plans. A trademark was also applied for, for Vice City Stories, including the rights to use it in movies. But a GTA movie isn't a likely event.

MORE XBLA TITLES SOON

Xbox Live Arcade has been very successful since the launch of the Xbox 360. Its host of downloadable trial games which can then be instantly bought has meshed well with gamers around the world.

Microsoft is aiming to increase the Xbox Live Arcade range with 15 more titles. Speaking at this year's Games Developers Conference in San Jose, Microsoft talked about the growth of the service.

Adamant that no title should exceed 50MB (so that it can fit on the standard Memory Card unit) Microsoft has strict rules that define the Xbox Live Arcade games. Upcoming titles such as Street Fighter II will have to abide by these rules. As such, it is expected that Street Fighter II and the other upcoming titles will all have Xbox Live support for multiplayer and the coveted 'Achievements' which are unlocked when certain criteria are met.

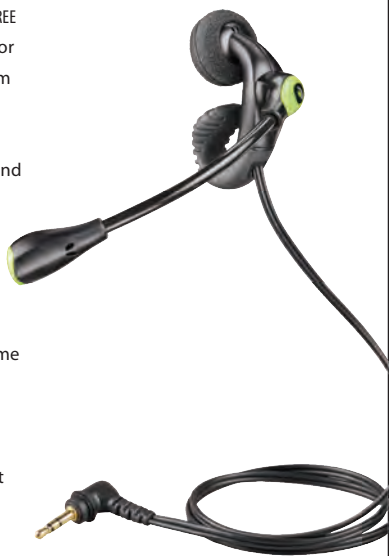
Geometry Wars: Retro Evolved, which has seen immense success on Xbox Live Arcade, is also expected to see a sequel in the near future.

PLANTRONICS 360 HEADSETS FOR GAMERS

PLANTRONICS HAS UNVEILED THREE new gaming headsets for the Xbox 360. The GameCom X30 and X20 feature single-ear designs allowing you to experience crystal clear sound within your game as well as being able to chat offline with other players in the same room. The headsets have noise-cancelling mics, inline volume and mute controls.

"I've been looking for a single-ear headset for the Xbox 360 — something that would be comfortable for several hours of online play with friends and during competitions," said Ashley Jenkins (Jinx) of the Frag Dolls, a group of girl gamers. "The moment I tried on the X30 I knew I'd found what I was looking for. It has a sexy design and is ideal for both comfort and quality."

[www.plantronics.com]



FACTOR 5'S LAIR FOR PLAYSTATION 3

HERE'S THE FIRST (REPORTED) image from Factor 5's upcoming PlayStation 3 title Lair. There was a short trailer on show at TGS last year, but little more has been seen of Lair since then. Apparently the game focuses on dragon combat. The screenshot shows an HUD with apparent context actions you can activate, such as attacking turrets or other dragons. The current track record for pre-release PlayStation 3 media has been less than enthusiastic. Screenshots of MotorStorm, shown at E3 last year, don't quite have the fidelity Sony promised us. In fact, the MotorStorm screenshots released at GDC this year bear almost no resemblance to the video Sony showed last year.

It may be many things, but it's not what Sony showed at E3 '05



NYKO CONSOLE ACCESSORIES



PSP CHARGER GRIP

Nyko has released a PSP peripheral which emulates the PS2 controller and can be used with your PSP. It easily clips on and off and comes with a rechargeable lithium-ion battery providing you with five hours of additional battery life. The PSP recognises the Charger Grip as an external battery source allowing the grip to transfer its power to the PSP, recharging the unit.

"The most important things about handheld gaming are portability, comfort and battery life. This product addresses all three," said Susan Corben, vice president of marketing, Nyko Technologies. "The new Charger Grip allows customers to play longer and more comfortably without detracting from the portability of the PSP."



INTERCOOLER 360

Among some of the newer accessories which Nyko has available for the Xbox 360, this is one of the more intriguing. The Intercooler 360 is a high efficiency, snap-on cooling device that uses three fans to dramatically increase air flow out of the 360. It claims to reduce heat which in turn will promote extended life and reliability of the components inside the console. Sitting snugly on the back of your 360 it has auto or manual power on and off and can be attached in either the horizontal or vertical position.

[www.nyko.com]

CHARTS

PC GAMES

| # | Title |
|----|---|
| 1 | Sims 2 Nightlife |
| 2 | Brother Bear |
| 3 | Juiced |
| 4 | Sims 2 |
| 5 | Brian Lara Cricket 05 |
| 6 | Serious Sam 2 |
| 7 | Rugby 2006 |
| 8 | Knights Of The Temple 2 |
| 9 | Football Manager 2006 |
| 10 | Gun |
| 11 | Flight Simulator 98 Exclusive |
| 12 | Lock On Exclusive |
| 13 | Train Simulator Exclusive |
| 14 | Age Of Empires 3 Collectors Edition |
| 15 | Rome Total War & Barbarian Invasion Double Pack |

PLAYSTATION 2

| # | Title |
|----|-----------------------------------|
| 1 | Black |
| 2 | King Kong Collectors Edition |
| 3 | Singstar 2 Party with Microphones |
| 4 | Tekken 5 Platinum |
| 5 | Crazy Frog Racer |
| 6 | Commandos Strike Force |
| 7 | Jacked |
| 8 | True Crime 2 New York |
| 9 | Sonic Gems Collection |
| 10 | Spartan Total Warrior |
| 11 | WWE Smackdown vs Raw 2006 |
| 12 | SSX4 On Tour |
| 13 | Bond From Russia With Love |
| 14 | Battlefield 2 Modern Combat |
| 15 | Soul Caliber 3 |

PSP

| # | Title |
|----|--|
| 1 | Grand Theft Auto Liberty City Stories |
| 2 | FIFA 2006 |
| 3 | INXS Live Baby Live (Music UMD) |
| 4 | Harry Potter & Goblet Of Fire |
| 5 | Toca Race Driver 2 |
| 6 | Everybody's Golf |
| 7 | XXX? The Next Level Movie (UMD Movie) |
| 8 | Hellboy (UMD Movie) |
| 9 | Midway Arcade Treasures |
| 10 | Stealth (UMD Movie) |
| 11 | White Chicks (UMD Movie) |
| 12 | Goldfrapp Supernature (Music UMD) |
| 13 | Monty Python & The Holy Grail (UMD Movie) |
| 14 | Coldplay Live 2003 (Music UMD) |
| 15 | Kylie Minogue Showgirl Greatest Hits Tour Live (Music UMD) |

GAMEXPRT PSP PORTABLE THEATRE

The Portable Theatre transforms a PSP into a portable mini Home Cinema system, allowing you to listen to music, movies and games with hi-fi quality sound. It features a front stereo and super bass woofer and will also charge the PSP whilst in use. The optional blue glow effect is apparently for added ambience.

[www.pinpointce.co.uk]



STEELKEYS 6G

SteelKeys 6G is a professional gaming keyboard, designed and optimised for hardcore gamers. Features of the keyboard include the ability to support the use of up to nine keys simultaneously. Made from a hard thermoplastic casing and gold plated connectors, the face plate mounted keyset is said to have a life cycle of up to 60 million keystrokes.

The keyboard has undergone several revisions since the Asian launch, to further optimise it for First Person Shooters and the needs of gamers from the Western Hemisphere.

[www.steelseries.com]

GAME PAUSED

'Game Paused: A creative celebration of the videogame' is a collaborative venture between the gaming industry and the gaming community. Over 600 submissions were received from gamers, artists, graphic designers and photographers and the selected works of art will be published in the book, which is part of a project created to promote videogame culture.



R 199 - MAY 06



Space Ranger 2: Dominators

200 years after the first chapter for Space Rangers, a new, even more dangerous threat arises in the galaxy. A key planet producing war androids has become self-aware and is attempting to conquer the galaxy one planet at a time. These machines are not only capable of fulfilling any order, but they have their own intellect and force of will. This new type of cyber life is driven only by instinct of destruction and cares only about expanding the realm of the silicate.



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2

RELEASE: FIFA World Cup 2006 (PC)

RELEASE: Rise of Nations: Rise of Legends (PC) Order for only R239.95.
 ◀ Offer Ends 31 May. @ www.kalahari.net

MAY

9

10

EVENT: E3 2006 – Electronic Entertainment Expo

(May 10-12) Once again, the biggest gaming expo hits the planet and NAG will be there to cover it. Held in Los Angeles, E3 will have the biggest games and the biggest names – staying true to its catchphrase "Where business gets fun." Look out for our annual E3 Supplement which will be in the July issue of NAG. [www.e3expo.com]

15

RELEASE: Lara Croft Tomb Raider: Legend (PSP) Date TBA ▶

16

RELEASE: Heroes of Might and Magic V (PC) Date TBA ▶
 Pre-order for only R249.95 @ www.kalahari.net

RELEASE: Heroes of Might and Magic V Collectors Edition (PC) Date TBA
 Pre-order for only R339.95 @ www.kalahari.net

22

30

RELEASE: Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon 3: Advanced Warfighter (PC)
 Date TBA Pre-order for only R249.95 @ www.kalahari.net

NEWS: Recently NAG had a forum members meet-and-greet in Pretoria which resulted in the expected arcade hi-jinx. Avid forum members who didn't attend will be pleased to know that 'Thread? Lock!' Brazed failed to prove his heterosexuality while playing ParaParaParadise. Thanks to everyone who attended, and keep your eyes peeled on the www.nag.co.za forums for dates of future get-togethers. ▲

31

RELEASE: TalkMan (PSP)

RELEASE: Hitman: Blood Money (PC / PS2)

RELEASE: NARC (PC / PS2)



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| | | |
|--|--|--|
|  | <p>5</p> <p>RELEASE: Metroid Prime: Hunters (DS)</p> <p>RELEASE: Space Invaders: Evolution (PSP)</p> | <p>6/7</p> <p>NEWS: It was a quiet 1st of April in a tiny Ohio town, until residents discovered 'suspicious packages' throughout the town. After calling the bomb squad, they found out that it was an April Fools' prank, played by five girls from Ravenna, Ohio (12,000 residents). They placed 17 cardboard replications of the Super Mario Bros. '2' block around town. The girls may face criminal charges. Ravenna Police Chief Randall McCoy said, "The girls found an Internet site called Mario Question Blocks which told you step by step how the game is played, along with instructions on wrapping the packages, just to see what kind of response you get. This game is evidently being played all over the country." [www.qwantz.com/posterchild]</p> |
| <p>11</p> <p>RELEASE: Dexter (PSP) ▲</p> <p>RELEASE: Aeon Flux (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: Samurai Warriors: State of War (PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: SOCOM: US Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo (PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: Spongebob Squarepants: The Yellow Avenger (PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: The Silent Hill Collection/Experience (PS2 / PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: Tokobots (PSP)</p> | <p>12</p> <p>RELEASE: 25 to Life (PC) ►</p> |  |
| <p>18</p> <p>RELEASE: Ape Escape 3 (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: Battle of Europe (PC)</p> <p>RELEASE: Rampage: Total Destruction (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: T-72 (PC)</p> <p>RELEASE: World Poker Tour (PSP)</p> | <p>19</p> <p>RELEASE: Field Commander (PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: TimeShift (PC / 360)</p> <p>RELEASE: Untold Legends 2: The Warrior's Code (PSP)</p> | <p>20/21</p> <p>EVENT: Adidas has developed a three-way soccer game to be played between Cape Town, Johannesburg and Durban. Audiences can SMS their support for the city of their choice, and the ball will move in the favour of the team with the most SMSes. This once-off event takes place at Canal Walk in Cape Town, the Wave House in Gateway at Umhlanga Rocks and Mary Fitzgerald Square in Newton. The game will run for an hour and a half from 14:00 to 15:30 at the selected venues. Each city has a code, which the audience will need to SMS to 343363 to show their support for their city. The code for Cape Town is WP, Johannesburg is GP and Durban is KZN.</p> |
| <p>25</p> <p>RELEASE: Buzz: The Big Quiz (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: Full Spectrum Warrior : Ten Hammers (PS2) ►</p> <p>RELEASE: Metal Gear Acid 2 (PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: Monster Hunter (PSP)</p> <p>RELEASE: Pro Evo Soccer 5 Platinum (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: SingStar Rocks (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: SOCOM 3: US Navy SEALs (PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: The Da Vinci Code (PC / PS2)</p> <p>RELEASE: X-Men III: The Official Game (PS2)</p> | <p>26</p>  | |
| <p>1</p> <p>NEWS: In 2003, at least 69% of undercover shoppers working for the Federal Trade Commission were able to buy mature-rated games. This year, fewer mature-rated games are being sold to children - only 42%. M-rated games are considered appropriate for ages 17 and up, but retailers have been lax on deciding when not to sell to younger children.</p> <p>JUNE</p> | | |



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MIKTAR'S MEANDERINGS

ROUND AND ROUND

By Miktar Dracon

FOR A WHILE NOW I've been dodging, ducking and weaving, trying to avoid writing about all the silly little things that have been happening in the multicoloured world of MMORPGs. I guess the first order of the day would be to exclaim: there are no MMORPGS really, at least not in this new batch of online games. They're all just MMOs, Massively Multiplayer Online games.

It's not a MMORPG if there are no non-combatant classes. Yes, I'm saying that if the classes you can choose only encompass going out and beating some poor kobold or rat over the head with a flail (or holy magic) then it's not a MMORPG. You need minstrels, merchants and diplomats. You need classes that solve problems with thinking and tinkering, instead of force.

The current surge in MMOs all lack basic non-combatant character classes for some reason. Wait, I know why! It's because MMOs (generally) appeal to the lowest common denominator. The most popular MMOs are like Britney Spears. They've been designed to appeal to the widest base of people, with people like me on the fringes shouting "You (and your music) suck!"

Lowest common denominator, as we all know, wants quick and easy violence (although that doesn't explain why World of LongwindedWalkalot is succeeding). Regardless, this venom you're seeing here on this page isn't wanton.

I'll state it plainly: when I look at the current batch of MMOs, I don't see anything new. World of Warcraft and even Guild Wars aren't doing anything new. History is repeating itself quite neatly, except this time it has more eye candy.

Not to point fingers, but history tends to repeat itself when man makes the same mistakes – and they are. I could refer to a specific 'plague' incident in a certain MMO, where the designers didn't think that perhaps they should inoculate the vendor NPCs against the plague. That was a ball of fun, with thousands of players dying instantly when they logged onto the server.

Then there's the recent social incident where a certain company did things that weren't quite fair. I could list more incidents, but these two are sufficient.

You see, both those (large) problems had already occurred before, a good 20 years ago in fact.

Back in the wonderful days of MUDs (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MUD) these problems cropped up and were elegantly solved. NPCs were inoculated against all transferable diseases and instead of the companies trying to rule over complex social structures, they simply put a good 'ignore' function in place.

And that was that. Years went by and these problems never occurred again. MUDs learned from each other, you see. They shared ideas, code and concepts, making sure history didn't repeat itself. They made sure men knew which mistakes to avoid.

THE MOST
POPULAR
MMOS ARE
LIKE BRITNEY
SPEARS.
THEY'VE BEEN
DESIGNED TO
APPEAL TO THE
WIDEST BASE
OF PEOPLE,
WITH PEOPLE
LIKE ME ON
THE FRINGES
SHOUTING
"YOU (AND
YOUR MUSIC)
SUCK!"

And then along comes the 'new generation', thinking it knows better. It ignores the lessons learned by the older MMORPGs (and they were MMORPGs), and it doesn't do research to see what mistakes could be avoided.

And thus, history makes a neat little loop. Plagues run rampant and companies think they can treat their online worlds like tidy little communist states.

But I don't blame the companies. No, I place the blame squarely on the shoulders of the consumers, the players and gamers who accept these mistakes as 'part and parcel' instead of wondering why the companies didn't spend a few hours doing some research.

Or is Wikipedia too big a word when all you can see is the bottom line or all you want is your next entertainment fix? **NAG**

Okay,
so she's a dog...



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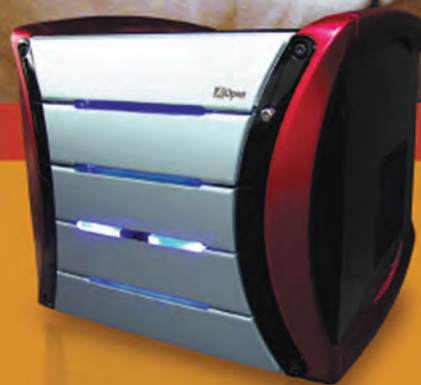
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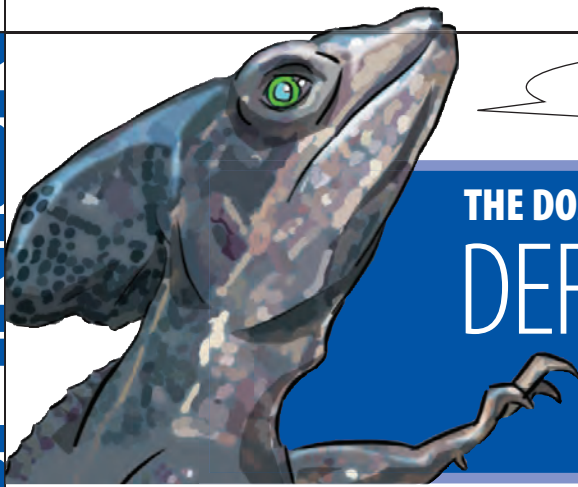
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THE DOMAIN OF THE BASILISK DEFENCE OF THE AIRHEADS

By Anton Lines

IF YOU'RE NOT AMONGST the millions of people addicted to World of Warcraft, chances are you're addicted to DotA instead. DotA, or 'Defence of the Ancients', is a custom map for Warcraft III that's quickly becoming one of the most popular online games in South Africa. The servers are populated twenty-four hours a day and you'll often find upwards of thirty people playing at four o'clock on a weekday morning. But with the huge growth in numbers, the DotA community, sadly, seems to be going the way of the Counter-Strike kiddies.

First, let me state for the record that I love this game. It's a unique, brilliant concept that's doing wonders for the popularity of strategy gaming. The idea is quite simple. DotA takes the most imminently playable aspect of Warcraft III – heroes – and makes an entire game of it. There are no base-building, no resource-harvesting and no conventional armies – just one hero per player, and five players per team. The teams are pitted against each other on a map filled with creeps (computer-controlled units) that attack each other from either side. You defend your half, attack the other, and kill your opponents' heroes as often as possible. With each kill (and by killing creeps), your heroes level up and earn gold to buy more powerful items. With over seventy heroes to choose from, the game is blessed with a great deal of depth, despite its overt simplicity.

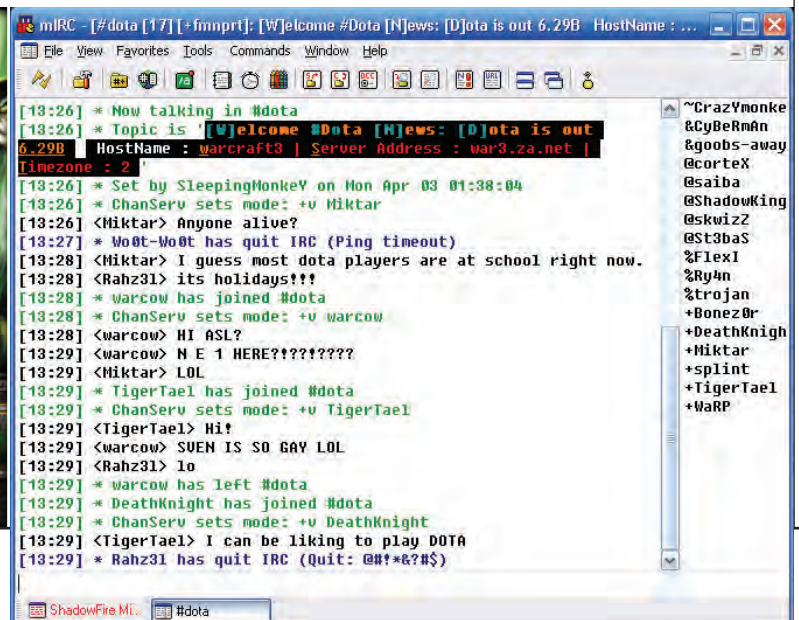
When professional teams across the world started to pick up DotA players, it became clear that the game was heading into the realm of e-sports. And it didn't take long for this competitive phenomenon to take hold in South Africa. Already there are online DotA leagues, and the first large tournament has just taken place recently, for which they managed to get

GAME HOSTS, STOP BEING THE INTOLERANT BIGOTS THAT YOU ARE AND GIVE THE NEW PLAYERS A CHANCE (UNTIL THEY PROVE THEMSELVES UNWORTHY)

together R10,000 in prize money.

The only problem, dear readers, is that the local DotA community is starting to become disturbingly elitist. New players, be warned! You will be kicked from almost every game you join. I don't like to use my own nickname for obvious reasons, but it has reached the point where I have to brandish the fact that I write for this magazine to even get a game. In the two months I've been playing, I have been subjected to more abuse than I received in two whole years playing Counter-Strike. That, let me tell you, is quite an achievement. The unskilled are ganged up on by their opponents and insulted by their own team-mates. The unknowns are kicked from games to make space for the 'knowns'. Without a friend high-up in the community, it's a frustrating road ahead for any newbie.

So here's my solution. Game hosts, stop being the intolerant bigots that you are and give the new players a chance (until they prove themselves unworthy). Everybody is a newbie at least once, and everybody goes through the same learning process. Stop blaming new players when your team loses. If you're any better than them, you should win regardless. New players don't give your fellow starters a bad name. Make sure you have the latest version of the map before joining. Play a full game (quitting ruins it for everyone) and don't even try without a stable Internet connection. Everyone, use your heads and make sure the teams are balanced before you start. DotA is immense fun, relatively easy to learn, and caters for an extremely wide variety of strategies and skill levels. Let's not let it die. **NAG**
[www.dota-allstars.com, www.war3.co.za, IRC: Shadowfire.org #war3]



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DAMMIT LESS TENSION, MORE ATTENTION PLEASE!

By Megan Hughes

IT SEEMS TO ME that, of late, people have been getting a tad defensive about their games. Why do people have to take gaming so seriously? It is only a 'game' after all! I've seen it so often. People getting into really heated arguments just because their opinions differ when it comes to which game is the most-awesome-coolest-game-ever-made. Then again, people also tend to get a bit tense when it comes to rugby, which also happens to be just a game. And then we like to justify our aggression/enthusiasm (depending on whether your team is winning or losing) by saying that it's all part of the game, as if sport wouldn't be sport without it.

So, is 'gaming' a sport? Well, according to the Illustrated (yes, I like picture books) Oxford English Dictionary (such a useful tool when you're trying to prove a point), a sport is "... a game or competitive activity, especially an outdoor one involving physical exertion." Okay, so pressing a button isn't exactly strenuous, but gaming has definitely become quite competitive in recent years - even in South Africa. The dictionary also gives, amongst some others, another definition of sport: "... amusement, fun", which also happens to be the objective of any game.

Right, so now we have an excuse for getting so aggressive about our 'sport', but I still think we all need to relax just a little bit. I suppose it's because it's still a small industry in South Africa, and the fact that only a relative few are really trying to support and grow the culture is why we've all gotten a little 'tense' about the whole thing. But it's 'going to take time, you know'. Which is difficult for us living in the instant-world to fathom, but it's the truth and unfortunately no arguments will speed it up.

For example, the other day I was happily chatting with one of my co-workers and I happened to mention to this fellow gamer, and NAG fan, that I didn't really enjoy the Doom series. I have nothing against the game, but I'm the typical girl-gamer.

**NEXT TIME YOU
FEEL LIKE GOING
OFF AT SOMEONE
BECAUSE THEY
PREFER REAL
LIFE SKATE-
BOARDING TO
TONY HAWK'S:
WASTELAND
FOR THE
PLAYSTATION
2, OR AGE OF
EMPIRES TO
QUAKE 4, LET
THEM BE AND
GET ON WITH
LIFE**

Give me Sims 2 and Black & White any day. I'm definitely not the person to call when you want to LAN scary games with blood and guts and guns.

Unfortunately for me, this led him into an hour long rant (interrupted every now and then by customers and other random people who weren't planning on spending any money, but who felt like annoying me all the same) about how brilliant Doom was, and how I couldn't be a true gamer if I didn't appreciate Doom in all its bloody glory. He then insisted I should, at the very least, watch the new Doom movie just to prove to him, and apparently the gaming community at large, that I was, in fact, an actual real life gamer. Damn, why did I have to open my big mouth?

Now, if he had just stopped for a moment and considered the fact that not everyone likes the same flavour ice cream (why should they?), it would have saved us both from an extremely boring hour at work. Actually, forget that. Work is, by its very definition, always boring, but at least I wouldn't have received a lecture.

So next time you feel like going off at someone because they prefer real life skateboarding to Tony Hawk's: Wasteland for the PlayStation 2, or Age of Empires to Quake 4, let them be and get on with life. It's seriously not that important, and about as intelligent as road rage. I mean hello? You're annoyed that they're holding up traffic, so you start a fight in the middle of the road. Well done 'brainiac'! **NAG**



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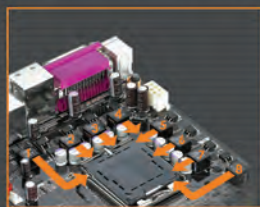


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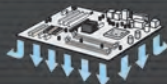


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KINGPIN

THERE'S NO TIME... NO TIME

By Michael James

MY FIRST EXPERIENCE IN this whole gaming magazine business was as a freelancer - or more correctly a freeloader. It was a brief and glorious existence, the very stuff of my childhood fantasies. The fantasy didn't last very long when it actually improved, and I was hired as the Editor of a little-known South African gaming publication, New Age Gaming. To be honest, my initial motivation for getting into the business of writing game reviews was the free games which came along with the job. I'd been playing games my whole life, had dedicated every second of my time to playing them and often dreamed of the day when I would move to the UK and join a gaming magazine team (this was back in the Commodore 64 and Amiga days, the dark ages in terms of gaming publications in South Africa). Somehow I ended up living the dream, but a better one. Right, pack away those tissues - this is where it gets ugly. Having just launched a new magazine (Custom PC South Africa), moved house and fired up the rAge 2006 engines, I now have no time to play games. As absurd as it might sound, I've been reduced to reviewing PSP games because short quick snatches of gaming is all that's been left for me in this cruel world. I leave early for meetings these days just so I can spend a few minutes finishing off a level in reception, and at the first sign of a sneeze I'm off, unannounced, to the doctor. This all made me think that I'm probably not the only gamer this has happened to at some stage. Perhaps it eventually happens to all of us in varying degrees of severity, and in more extreme cases some hardcore gamers actually sell their gaming machines because they never plan to use them again. NAG has a huge readership which currently keeps growing, but I've discovered that at the top-end of the age demographic, people are dropping off here and there. While it's all good a well for the magazine to keep filling the bottom-end

IS IT FAIR
TO TURN
YOUR BACK
ON GAMING
BECAUSE
OTHER
SEEMINGLY
MORE
IMPORTANT
THINGS LEAVE
YOU NO TIME?
DO THIS
AND YOU DO
YOURSELF AN
INJUSTICE. WE
ALL KNOW THE
ONE ABOUT ALL
WORK AND NO
PLAY!

with young and energetic gamers (the growing crowds at rAge are testament to this), it's sad to see the few at the top leaving gaming behind because they have no time to play anymore. More and more you'll see a regular forum member or online gamer announce that his wife has just had a baby and he'll be away for a few weeks. It sounds temporary, but sometimes they just never come back. It's a little like putting your passion in an old age home and only visiting every other month, still feeling the guilt but justifying it with your busy life. For me it's a little less severe. I know my current crisis will eventually settle down and I'm certainly going to make time to play the new Tomb Raider, but I'm motivated a little differently here - it's supposed to be my job. So, I guess it's about priorities then. Sure, having a wife and kids and a demanding job is more important than playing games, but consider what you're giving up. Is it fair to turn your back on gaming because other seemingly more important things leave you no time? Do this and you do yourself an injustice. We all know the one about all work and no play!

IN OTHER UNRELATED NEWS

WE'RE ALMOST FINISHED WITH all the rAge preliminary planning and should have something to shout about in the June or July issues of NAG, SA Computer Magazine and Custom PC South Africa in terms of the LAN, exhibitors, venue and a few other surprises. Internationally, E3 is approaching faster than a freight train kicked by Chuck Norris, and this year is promising some big surprises with more than the usual amount of titles being kept under wraps and only available to view by invitation. Watch out for the July issue of NAG in which we'll have the E3 Supplement sponsored by our good friends at Intel and Electronic Arts South Africa. **NAG**





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FROM ENROTH TO ASHAN:
THE HISTORY OF

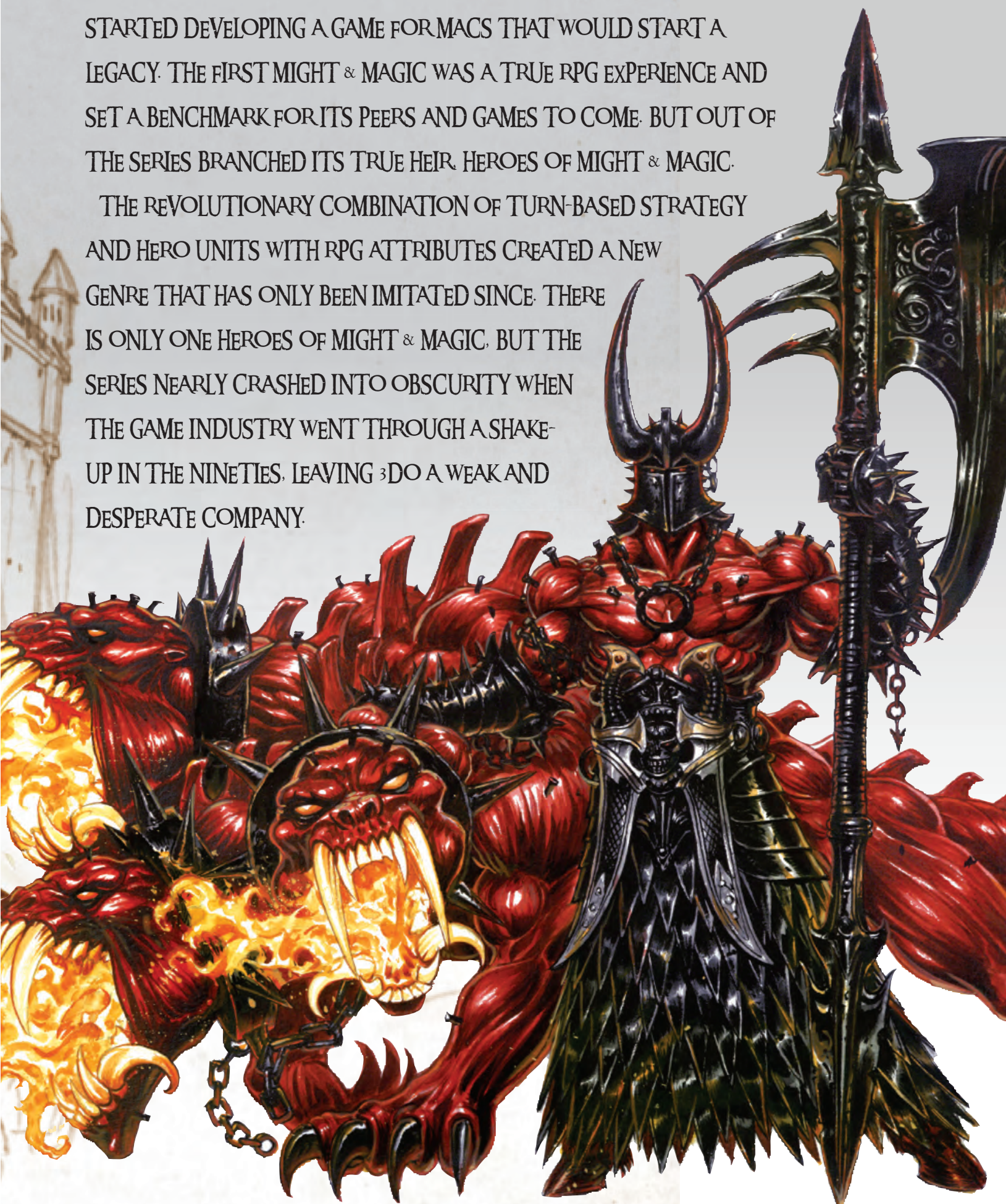
HEROES

OF MIGHT AND MAGIC



BACK IN 1983, A LONE PROGRAMMER, ARTIST AND GAME DESIGNER STARTED DEVELOPING A GAME FOR MACS THAT WOULD START A LEGACY. THE FIRST MIGHT & MAGIC WAS A TRUE RPG EXPERIENCE AND SET A BENCHMARK FOR ITS PEERS AND GAMES TO COME. BUT OUT OF THE SERIES BRANCHED ITS TRUE HEIR, HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC.

THE REVOLUTIONARY COMBINATION OF TURN-BASED STRATEGY AND HERO UNITS WITH RPG ATTRIBUTES CREATED A NEW GENRE THAT HAS ONLY BEEN IMITATED SINCE. THERE IS ONLY ONE HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC, BUT THE SERIES NEARLY CRASHED INTO OBSCURITY WHEN THE GAME INDUSTRY WENT THROUGH A SHAKE-UP IN THE NINETIES, LEAVING 3DO A WEAK AND DESPERATE COMPANY.



HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC 1995

HEROES OF MIGHT & Magic, for all effective purposes, has been a long time coming. The first glimmer of this spin-off came when the series started with *Might & Magic*, a 1986 medieval fantasy RPG where players took on monsters throughout the *Might & Magic* world. Then in 1990, also from *Might & Magic* creator and New World Computing founder Jon van Caneghem, came *King's Bounty*. In this, players assumed the role of a knight out to find a sceptre that would help save his king's kingdom.

So the marriage was almost natural. Still, when *Heroes of Might & Magic* came out, it was a new genre and a complete new take on the RPG and turn-based genres.

The main focus fell upon the heroes, who travelled the world to gather creatures, towns and resources. The more towns and resources controlled, the more

creatures could be hired. Everything was represented in a turn-based fashion, as heroes moved across the game map with limited movement points. Resources came from building up the towns across the world. The same principle worked in battle: creatures had a limited amount of movement and the pecking order was determined by creature speed. Hero stats affected the creatures and even though only five types could be taken into battle, creatures could be stacked into infinity. At the end of the day, beating the game involved taking over all four castles in the game with the most powerful monster army you could muster. *Heroes of Might & Magic* also marked a departure from the traditional *Might & Magic* world. The only connection appeared to be with Lord Ironfist, a name that appeared in both *Might & Magic* and *Heroes of Might & Magic*. But the game

took place on a new planet and a new continent, Enroth. Four rulers fought for control: the sorceress Queen Lamanda, Lord Alamar from the warlocks, the barbarian Lord Slayer and the knightly Lord Ironfist. Story didn't play a big role at this stage of the *Heroes of Might & Magic* series, though in terms of legacy, it was Ironfist that ruled supreme in the first game. Still, players could play any of the four characters and take over Enroth.

As a game, *Heroes of Might & Magic* made a big impact and is arguably only second to *Heroes of Might & Magic 2*. In the same year it was released, the game captured awards for Strategy Game of the Year, Turn-based Game of the Year and Game of the Year from several publications. Ironically, it was the one *Heroes of Might & Magic* title that didn't get an expansion, but a new genre was born: the turn-based strategy RPG.



HEROES OF MIGHT & MAGIC 2: THE SUCCESSION WARS 1996

HEROES OF MIGHT & Magic 2 is regarded by many long-time fans as the best in the series. That isn't to say that Heroes of Might & Magic was terrible from this point onwards, but it did start spiralling out of control as 3DO bought New World Computing and then started to lose money. Many lament the death of the developer years down the line, but Caneghem is more sober about the events: "I will never regret selling New World Computing, since I know many other companies similar to New World Computing went out of business. I do feel bad about watching the franchises I created wither away. But I did learn quite a few lessons along the way. Mainly that if you're not happy with what you're doing, you need to move on, regardless of the difficulty."

Heroes of Might & Magic 2 introduced a lot of important gameplay tweaks to the series. In the story, Ironfist had won the last big battle and ruled supreme for 25 years. Like any king he had to eventually die and leave his kingdom to his two sons. They promptly started fighting for control over their inheritance. But this still remained a backdrop to what was a large and involved game. The amount of castles in Heroes of Might & Magic 2 was expanded to six, probably the least of the numerous improvements. Necromancers and the undead made their debut (complete with indignant vampires strutting around, exclaiming "Blai!" in a heavy Transylvanian drawl), as well as a lot of new creatures and the ability to upgrade monster dwellings. The magic system from the original was replaced as well. Formerly players used their knowledge score to determine how long a spell could be remembered. But now spells were remembered permanently. Instead, the knowledge score (times ten) determined spell points, which were used to cast spells and regenerated at about a point a day. This simplified magic use significantly.

The heroes also received a major upgrade. Apart from the primary four skills introduced in the first game, eight secondary skills were added. Every time a hero upgraded, he or she got one primary skill addition/enhancement and two for bonus skills. Players could even have multiple heroes across the map. There were artefacts spread across the world to find and use as well. This became one of the primary upgrades in the expansion, Price of Loyalty, which also added more map locations and new campaigns.



HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC III: THE RESTORATION OF ERATHIA 1999

THE THIRD GAME IN the series is where it started going wrong for some fans. The most significant change for them was the departure from Heroes of Might & Magic's colourful cartoon-like graphics, opting for more modern 3D rendered sprites. This became a sour point for some, but the rest of the game kept the Heroes of Might & Magic system intact. The story tied the series back to Might & Magic VI. Queen Catherine, who was married to Ironfist, headed over to the continent of Erathia when she heard it had collapsed into war after the death of King Gryphonheart, Catherine's father. Everyone was fighting over control of her dad's kingdom, which was literally being invaded from all sides thanks to some complicated feuding that had broken out. Catherine quickly struck alliances with the Angels and Gryphons and set about restoring order to the land.

Despite the shift in location, the game remained close to the series. There were now eight strongholds: three evil, three good and two neutral. Each had seven creature types that could be upgraded once each, and players moved across the game world to capture towns and resources in order to buy larger and larger armies. Infinite stacking wasn't in the series anymore at this point, but the damage from stacked units was cumulative, plus the hero now appeared on the battlefield instead of simply commanding the forces.

Heroes of Might & Magic III had two expansions: Armageddon's Blade and The Shadow of Death. The first brought along a ninth town, the Conflux, which added a lot more creatures (including four new types

of dragons) and heroes (sixteen to be exact) to the game. It also introduced important tweaks to the interface. Rare magic creatures became a sought-after addition to armies, since they were much more powerful than town creatures. But these could mostly only be found playing through a campaign. Shadow of Death did its bit in adding more creatures and campaigns as well – both expansions remedied a specific criticism against Heroes of Might & Magic III. Although the numbers have been shifted up in terms of towns and monsters, fans complained that the game was still essentially the same, just with newer graphics. But it did mark a brief appearance on Linux for the series, plus Mac users finally gained access to the large amount of Heroes of Might & Magic III fan maps via the expansion changes (formerly these were limited to the PC version) through Heroes of Might & Magic III Complete.



HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC IV 2002

DEPENDING ON WHOM YOU ask, Heroes of Might & Magic IV was either one of the best or the worst in the series. But, unlike the rest of the Might & Magic titles, Heroes of Might & Magic hadn't quite collapsed under publisher involvement from 3DO. Still, for series creator Van Caneghem it was a low point.

"I worked on the initial design for Heroes IV, then when things started to go awry (too many cooks in the kitchen), I had to help finish the game and get it into a shippable state," he told CGW in 2004. "To the credit of the team involved, I think we were able to create a fun game, even though it had many flaws that I was very unhappy with. I had little to no involvement with MMIX; if it had been my decision, it would have never shipped."

Some fans were unhappy with the general changes made to the game. The most obvious was replacing the traditional hex grid with a higher resolution square grid. Some complained that this reduced the strategic ability of players, but the square grid did make positioning of different sized units much more efficient. 3DO placed a



lot of effort into upgrading the graphics engine, moving towards an isometric POV for battlefields.

Another problem emerged from the plot. The series had once again shifted location. In a nutshell, two major characters brandishing apocalyptic weapons got into a fight. When the weapons collided, they destroyed all of Enroth. Many creatures and characters from throughout the series managed to escape through portals to a new world called Axeoth. Thus, the game started with conquering this new world from the other refugees from Enroth. This meant that a lot of the creatures from former instalments disappeared. Creature upgrades were also removed, leading fans to complain about feeling limited. Thanks to a messy and problematic development cycle,



Heroes of Might & Magic IV hit the shelves with a lot of bugs, including an amusing one where the computer opponent would 'kill' itself on the hardest difficulty, because it went after overly powerful creatures from the start. It received poor reviews and would be the last Heroes of Might & Magic title 3DO would produce before filing for bankruptcy in 2003. Ubisoft promptly bought the rights to the series for a steal at \$1.3 million. That said, some fans regarded it as a step up from the third game, despite its flaws. It's become the game in the series fans love and hate. Cramped gameplay and frustrating bugs took their toll, but IV showed the way forward for the series. Unfortunately, a lot of these hopes were dashed when Ubisoft bought the rights.

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC V

WHAT HORRIFIES SOME FANS about Ubisoft's involvement? Unlike the rest of Might & Magic, Heroes of Might & Magic wasn't a complete loss and 3DO even had a fifth game in the works. This could have produced a refined and polished version of IV, though Van Caneghem had already left the company at this stage. Ubisoft officially announced the fifth game's development in 2005, though it had already been under development since 2003 at Russian developer Nival (at that stage well-known for its RPGs and strategy titles in Europe and Russia).

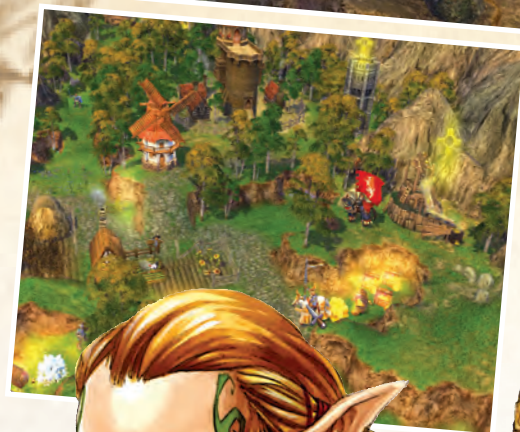
But the feeling left by the fourth game was that 3DO was really stumbling on its last legs and trying just about anything to get money out of the series. This is why fans at large regard Heroes of Might & Magic IV as a low point. Heroes of Might & Magic V returns to a lot of the basic gameplay elements used in the third title, such as the single-tier production system and a weekly production cycle to reduce micromanagement of towns. The new owners also decided to move the entire Might & Magic world to a new planet, Ashan. One of the fourth game's failings, an over-enthusiastic use of 3D, is remedied with a less showy but far more impressive engine. Rotating the 3D area will make finding treasures easier, and the modification extends into being able to select individual buildings in fully rendered cities. The RTS genre has matured nicely into using 3D, and the turn-based games are slowly following suit. A new story, six factions and over forty creature types are all features that Nival have mentioned, so in terms of hitting the traditional sweet spots, it has most on the list.

Telling of the legacy involved, the fifth game came with its own share of controversy, showing how passionate fans are about the series. When the Beta was launched in 2005, there were a lot of complaints about numerous bugs and problems. The Heroes of Might & Magic community feared that Nival wouldn't have the bugs sorted out in time for the then-April 05 release of the game, naturally reminding them of the problems in IV. SaveHeroes.org was launched to petition the delay of the game until the

problems were sorted out. The petition gathered 1,500 signatures in its first three days of opening. But soon after that, Gamespot reported that Ubisoft had already delayed the game before the Beta, citing financial planning records from the publisher. Fans didn't like this clandestine approach and demanded that Ubisoft make an official announcement about the game's delay. SaveHeroes.org even instituted a news blackout on Heroes of Might & Magic V until the announcement was made. As such, the official delay was announced and the game shifted to Q2, 2006. Interestingly, it has been suggested on several major Heroes of Might & Magic forums that SaveHeroes.org was actually a marketing move by Ubisoft.

Clearly the companies involved have a challenge ahead of them: the need to revive the Heroes of Might & Magic franchise not only to a new audience, but to fans as well – especially after the crash of the original publisher and the downward spiral of the Might & Magic series. Heroes of Might & Magic has remained a shining light for fans and even IV's stumble hasn't deterred anticipation for the next chapter. For once, a new publisher, developer and world don't matter much as long as these help bring back a classic series from the brink of oblivion.

For a more in-depth look at the Heroes of Might & Magic world, visit www.celestialheavens.com and www.heroesofmightandmagic.com. **NAG**



SiN

EPISODES

EMERGENCE

IN 1998, RITUAL TRIED to take the world by storm with SiN, a shooter that held a lot of promise and wowed us with a great demo and pre-release version. But the final product was riddled with bugs and the game also landed in direct competition against the hot new shooter, Half-Life.

But the developer is far from finished with the series, and last year announced plans to release a new SiN game in episodic format across Valve's online service, Steam. There are few disputing Ritual's own development credentials. Apart from the original SiN, the company also delivered Heavy Metal: FAKK2, Alice, Elite Force 2, Counter-Strike: Condition Zero and Black Hawk Down: Team Sabre. We spoke to Richard 'LEVELORD' Gray, co-founder of Ritual Entertainment (and level design legend) about the upcoming SiN: Emergence.

The original game was released in 1998. Why wait nearly a decade for the series to continue?

"1998 wow! I feel so old. We have wanted to continue SiNning since the first game was released. We have tried many, many times. We even went as far as [developing] demos in various engines, including Source, a few years ago. It just never happened. Now we have saved enough money to self-fund the game. It seems like a long time, but it has been worth the wait."

What are the benefits of using the Steam platform for distribution?

"Before I describe the benefits of digital distribution through Steam, everyone should know that we are also releasing Emergence worldwide via the traditional retail avenues."

Ritual believes that episodic gaming will be the next big step in game development and distribution. The model offers too many benefits to be anything less than trend-setting.

The first benefit is that the developer will deliver a steady stream of content to gamers. Instead of having to wait [the usual number of years] for a follow-up to their favourite game, gamers will only need to wait a few months. The mod community also benefits from this by getting a regular influx of new textures, models, and so on, for their projects.

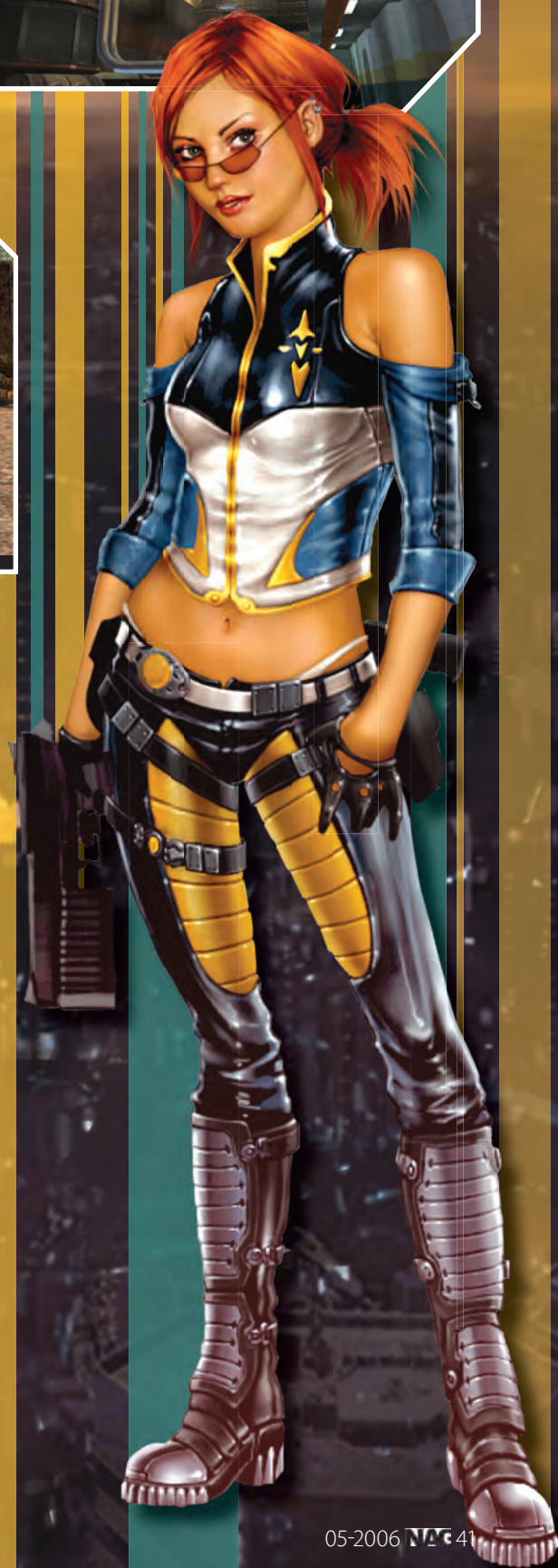
Episodic distribution has the advantage of coming with a lower price than non-episodic games. Instead of having to pay \$50+ for the typical eight to ten hours of gameplay, [gamers] can get one of our episodes for significantly less - approximately \$20 dollars for four to six hours of gameplay. If they enjoy the game, then they can invest more. If not, they can walk away without losing so much money. Another upside of episodic content is the ability to incorporate community feedback into upcoming episodes, which I'll get to in a moment."

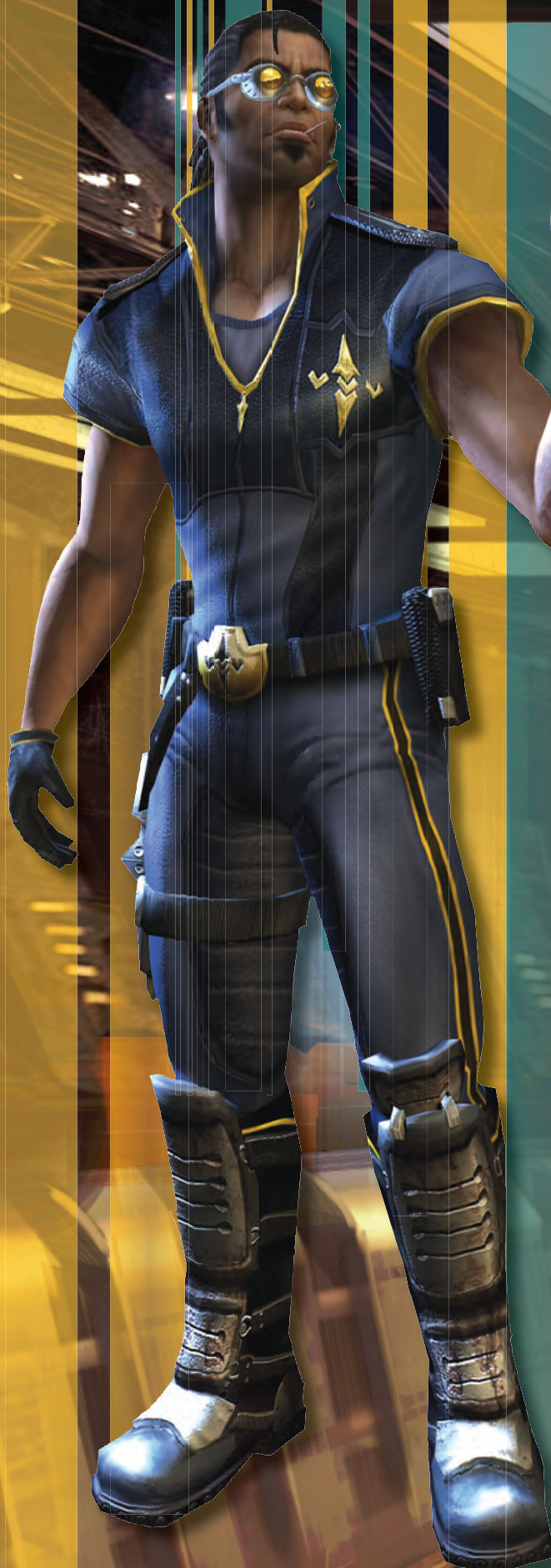
With episodes planned every six months, how does this differ from the normal development process? Do you have any future episodes in production as well?

"Ritual sees player feedback as one of the most essential benefits to this new model. We will be closely listening to our audience and using their feedback to design future episodes. This applies to the story, the characters, the gameplay, weapons, and even advances in technology. All said, we are currently in pre-design for the next episode. Other than the ramp-up time needed to start this first episode, we have probably experienced what will be a normal episode development cycle. We estimate six to eight months of production for each episode. We may produce multiple episodes at the same time, some spinning off into varying directions, but we are not sure when this will happen. We are near the end of the first episode now, and we are starting to pre-design the second."



Big guns, bigger explosions and women in tight tops - its Sin all over again





One of SiN: Emergence's features is an adjusting difficulty system. Can you elaborate on it?

"This is our Personal Challenge System. This is not a new feature in itself and has been attempted by many developers. We believe, though, that we have engineered the next advance in automatic skill level tailoring. Our lead programmer, Ken Harward, has developed a very cool 5-faceted system that closely monitors and maintains the player's performance. It then adjusts the gameplay in ways that I can't reveal. I can say that this is not the typical tweak hit points and enemy-counts. It is quite amazing!

As you have mentioned, it works very well keeping the level of gameplay within the scope of the particular player. We have held many, many testing sessions with groups of people that spanned the entire gamut of gaming experience. From novice to die-hard, the entire group always finished within 15 to 30 minutes of each other.

The player can check, at any time, [his/her] performance and how the system is monitoring [his/her] execution of the game."

Can you give a recap of the SiN storyline for readers not familiar with it?

"SiN takes place in Freeport City, a futuristic city overwhelmed by rising crime rates. The government has granted individual corporations the right to form private security forces, called Sec-Forces. The most respected among these is an organisation called HardCorps, led by Colonel John R. Blade. While investigating the source of a new and highly-addictive drug called U4, Blade discovered that a global mega-corporation, called SinTEK Industries, and its CEO, Elexis Sinclair, are behind the drug. With the intention of advancing humanity's evolution by several million years, Elexis altered U4's properties to mutate the genetic structure of its users. Blade went after SinTEK, shutting down several of their factories, and eventually managed to confront Elexis Sinclair herself.

Emergence now takes place four years after SiN. Elexis Sinclair is back and, despite Blade's efforts, still in control of SinTEK Industries. Blade, frustrated by his failure to bring her down, has grown bitter and sarcastic, and he'll stop at nothing to destroy Elexis for good this time.

As before, Blade is backed up by his resident tech whiz JC, as well as a new character named Jessica Cannon. Jessica [will] actually go on missions with Blade, and although she sometimes loses control of her temper, she'll prove to be a real asset to HardCorps."

How will the new series start?

"In the first episode, Blade and Jessica are hot on the heels of Viktor Radek, a local crime lord they suspect of running an illegal drug operation in the docks of Freeport. As Freeport continues to suffer from mutant attacks, especially in the poorer parts of the city, Blade has become nearly obsessed with bringing Elexis Sinclair and SinTEK to justice, and he will stop at nothing to make it happen.

Blade's latest lead is Viktor Radek, a relatively new face among Freeport's crime lords. Radek is suspected of running a secret U4 operation from of a derelict tanker located in an older part of the docks district. Having planted a tracker on Radek, Blade and his partner Jessica are now ready to move in for the kill."

Will the high level of interactivity seen in the first game be back in Emergence?

"We consider interactivity to be a trademark of Ritual! When the original SiN was released, it broke a lot of new ground; it took interactivity to an entirely new level. Obviously SiN Emergence will have plenty of environmental interactivity. SiN Episodes will feature the same amount of interactivity and a little extra, since we now have a fully-fledged physics engine to play around with. So not only will you be able to blow things up, but it'll happen in a physically correct way!

Beyond the normal sense of game interactivity, we have a new system called Context Look which allows JC and other NPCs to respond to what the player is looking at. As an example, if the player needs to find a certain device in a room full of gizmos, JC or Jessica will be able to tell what the [NPC] is looking at and react appropriately."

SUBJECT NAME: JESSICA CANNON

The newest addition to Blade's core team at HardCorps, Jessica Cannon is an often hot-headed, but nevertheless skilled field operative who doesn't hesitate to say exactly what's on her mind. Jessica is currently partnering up with Blade who is trying to soften her rough edges a bit.

Jessica Cannon will be voiced by Jen Taylor, who also voiced Cortana in the Halo series, as well as Kate Archer in NOLF 2: A Spy in H.A.R.M.'s Way.



SUBJECT NAME: JOHN BLADE

Colonel John R. Blade is the leader of HardCorps, one of the premier private security organizations in Freeport City. Four years ago, Blade and his team discovered that SinTEK Industries and its CEO, Elexis, Sinclair, were behind an increase in mutant activity in the city. Blade managed to shut down several SinTEK operated facilities involved in these activities and finally managed to track down Sinclair. Unfortunately, the self-proclaimed Mother Nature managed to escape at the last second, leaving Blade empty handed.

Following these events, Blade and HardCorps were unsuccessful to prove to the public that SinTEK was behind the mutants. Over the years, Blade has grown increasingly bitter and he will stop at nothing to bring Elexis and her company to justice. Blade will be voiced by Eric Mills, who also voiced him in the first SiN, and its expansion set, Wages of SiN.



SUBJECT NAME: VIKTOR RODDICK

Little is known about Viktor Radek. Originally from Eastern Europe, Radek recently surfaced in Freeport City, and is assumed to be in control of a sizeable U4 operation. HardCorps operatives have been trailing Radek for some time, hoping to get hard evidence regarding his activities in the city.

Viktor Radek will be voiced by David Scully, who has voiced many videogame characters, including Sergeant Johnson in the Halo games, as well as several characters in Alien vs. Predator and Tron 2.0.





Powered by Source, emergence boasts cutting edge physics and environments

SiN went toe-to-toe with Half-Life, and now Emergence is launching around the same time Half-Life 2 plans its own episodic content. Do you see this as competition?

"Well, the word 'competition' may be misconstrued by many readers. We certainly feel a sense of competition between each other within the game development industry, but it is more like that felt when playing football with your friends on a weekend afternoon. To have been 'beaten' by the original Half-Life was not a bad thing, as it was an inspiring thing. Half-Life 2 was even better - I mean beyond just the advances in technology and such - and it is the best shooter I have ever played.

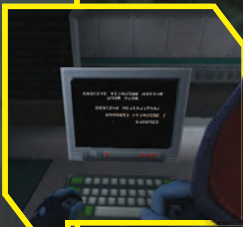
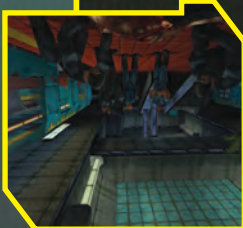
As many people know, we have worked with Valve over the years since the original SiN and Half-Life. Our new projects having met and interlaced is nothing but an honour for us, and I believe the folks at Valve feel the same way. It is a bit of cool history: Ritual releasing SiN on Steam and developing it [on] Half-Life 2's Source.

I think episodic games are here to stay and that this paradigm will become as popular, if not more, as the current non-episodic model. Episodic has been talked about for many years, but it was never an effective answer until digital distribution like Steam came online."

The original game featured action affected outcomes. Can players expect more of this, and is this where the community influence will play a role?

"Yes, these were our 'Action-Based Outcomes' (ABOs). On a grander scale, Ritual will be expanding this ability of the player to change the course of the game, in SiN Episodes, to include multiple episodes. We still are not sure to what extent this will happen, but we also plan to include players' actions in previous episodes to affect alternatives and derivatives in future episodes. There are actually several ways for the fans to influence the game. As an example of players' actions affecting the game, we will be using Steam's ability to track how players respond at certain decision points in the game for something we call 'Global Action-Based Outcomes'." **NAG**

SIN - 1998



Back when the Quake II engine was still hot-stuff, Ritual released the original SiN. Tasked with finding the source of a deadly new drug, lead protagonist John R. Blade made a reasonable impression on gamers, while sidekick J.C. annoyed the crap out of everyone.

The game itself (especially the demo) came across as ground-breaking – new and unique ideas and elements were thrust together to create a rollercoaster ride from on-rails machinegun-helicopter to hacking-an-ATM text game. The bugs however, made it so that the first boss just stood motionless while the player blasted away – this left a less favourable impression.

Oddly enough, the most memorable moment of SiN in the minds of gamers who are old enough to remember the game seems to be the Escher-house themed multiplayer level – the first-ever multiplayer level with multiple gravity axis.

While SiN did not share the success of the later Half-Life, it certainly did enough to etch itself into the minds of the old-school, who now ear-perk at the mention of the new episodic SiN Episodes.

So problems aside (and drab colour pallet aside), SiN did more right than wrong with its more plot-centric approach to the FPS genre, giving games the chance to really feel like they're doing something constructive instead of just mindlessly shooting bad guys.

PREVIEWS

THE DAY THE INTERNET DIED

APRIL 1ST IS A fun day, especially for fools and those trying to avoid work. An entire day where the stupid get to entertain the stupid, exclamations of "April Fools!" abound. For us who need to do something productive, April 1st marks the most useless day of the year – the whole day all news is to be ignored, all information about upcoming or existing games posted that day, trashed.

Here at the NAG office, we don't even check our emails on April 1st – there's no point in reading yet another badly-written 'Press Release' about Rockstar's upcoming game – Ping Pong. Wait, that wasn't an April Fools, just a badly written Press Release. Considering how integral the Internet is in the production of NAG (it's how we get our 'LOL' on), nothing is more frustrating than an entire day of suffering fools.



THE MOVIES: STUNTS & EFFECTS

DEVELOPER: Lionhead

PUBLISHER: Activision

PLATFORM: PC

GENRE: Management

RELEASE DATE: Q2 2006

IT REMAINS A MYSTERY why The Movies didn't take the world by storm. But fans will be happy to see the series isn't dead. In fact, Lionhead is gearing for the release of the game's first expansion, Stunts & Effects. The expansion will add stuntmen, who in turn bring their own collection of dangerous stunts to wow audiences with. Special effects also debut in the game, so those cheesy sci-fi movies you have been making might improve now. As is fitting for an expansion, a new movie toolset, new techniques to shoot movies and new locations are also part of the package. Meanwhile, the online community is booming with over 60,000 fan-made movies already on the official site. With the expansion (the first of many, we hope), things are only likely to get better.



CRYSIS

DEVELOPER: Crytek

PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts

PLATFORM: PC

GENRE: FPS

RELEASE DATE: TBA

CRYISIS HAS GOT SOMETHING to do with aliens invading Earth. Ho-hum! The real reasons why we are excited are because: (1) it is Crytek; and (2) it is CryENGINE 2. If Far Cry is still a fresh memory in your head, and it should be, the very idea of Crytek working on another game with an engine that is said to be putting anything on the market to shame should have you excited. It's the track record: Far Cry was innovative with its game dynamic, so we have high hopes that Crysis will present even more detailed and open environments, combined with even smarter bad guys and more breath-taking scenery. The action is mostly set around a chain of islands where a mysterious meteor crashes, so there's more of that jungle goodness too. Besides, after seeing Far Cry Instincts, PC gamers are feeling short-changed.

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WHAT WE WANT...



DEAD RISING [360]

Ah, nothing like an overzealous freelance photojournalist fighting against the innumerable zombie hordes. Dead Rising really appeals to everyone here at the NAG office – we're all zombie fans. With full freedom inside a shopping mall to kill, maim, clip and smash zombies, Dead Rising is looking better and better with each successive trailer. It is amazing how many zombies Capcom can fit into a scene on the Xbox 360. Capcom has also allowed players a full range of attacks, either with their own fists or by creatively using items found inside the mall. Even a lawnmower can be taken to a zombie's head to create a wonderful zombie-smoothie. Now if only the game's release date would change from TBA to an actual date...



AUTO ASSAULT [PC]

Vehicular MMO-car-pee-gee fun. With a fresh take on the MMORPG market, Auto Assault puts you in a heavily armed car of death against the mutant/human/biotech masses, all online. The monthly subscription fee might not appeal to everyone, especially if you've been bitten by the Guild Wars bug, but if you're willing to pay for quality service, new content and so forth, then Auto Assault is very, very, delicious. An interesting facet of the game is that each of the three races starts in their own corner. As you level up, gain more powers and better cars, your reward is the ability to take on human opponents in a free-for-all slugfest – with Ion Cannons.



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AGE OF EMPIRES III EXPANSION

DEVELOPER: Ensemble
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: RTS
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

DIVIDE AND CONQUER! OVERRUNNING other nations and stealing their land isn't as fashionable now as it was in the past few thousand years, but strategy buffs can still indulge in games on the eras. Age of Empires finally landed its boat in the terrain that other historical RTS games have been dabbling in for a while: the European nations exploring and conquering the New World. You'll have to wait for the Age of Empires III expansion, though, to take control over Native American tribes. The European nations will also get enhancements, ditto for home cities. There will be a new single-player campaign, new maps and updated visuals. More eye-candy for the Age of Empires junkies! Considering the success Age of Empires III has enjoyed, there's no doubt this will be well received.



MORTAL KOMBAT: ARMAGEDDON

DEVELOPER: Midway
PUBLISHER: Midway
PLATFORM: PS2, Xbox
GENRE: Beat-'em-up
RELEASE DATE: Q3 2006

HAS MORTAL KOMBAT FINALLY transcended the need for a story, happy with only being a powerhouse combat game? This has happened with series like DOA, Soul Calibur and Street Fighter. At one point even the fans didn't know the storyline anymore. One day combat games won't have final cut-scenes or stories. It'll just be about beating up the other character. That's what we thought when Midway announced Armageddon, a Mortal Kombat title which will give access to the most extensive list of fighters the series has ever seen. A 'make your own fighter' mode also debuts and we're keen to see what custom fatalities there are. But story long ago stopped mattering in Mortal Kombat. All fans want is the gore, speed and that sound of fists meeting cracking bone.



BLACK & WHITE 2: BATTLE OF THE GODS

DEVELOPER: Lionhead
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: God game
RELEASE DATE: TBA

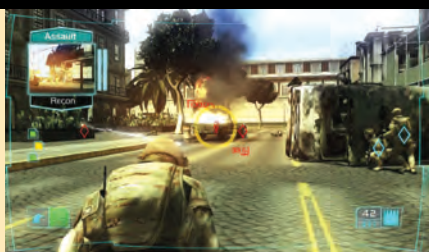
APPARENTLY THE AZTECS WEREN'T that happy with getting their butts kicked in Black & White 2, so they made a surplus amount of human sacrifices. This brought about a new evil deity who is busy tearing Eden to bits. Time to crack your knuckles and sweep your near-omnipotent hand to fight this new menace. A Black & White expansion is not any kind of surprise. So what can you expect? One new creature, two new lands and a handful of new miracles. There are also two new nations and one new enemy creature to look out for. Other than that it's still up to whether you want to be good or bad. Perhaps it's better to win over the new god's worshippers with kindness, but who can resist throwing rocks and fire at them?



BATTLEFIELD 2142

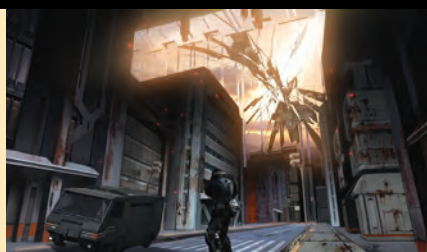
DEVELOPER: DICE
PUBLISHER: Electronic Arts
PLATFORM: PC
GENRE: MM FPS
RELEASE DATE: 2006

BEFORE YOU COULD SAY "Snap," DICE took its fledgling Battlefield 1942 through Vietnam and out the other side in a modern conflict. Now, perhaps with a wary eye on Quake Wars, it looks to the future: 2142, to be precise. The entire planet is covered with ice in a new Ice Age. The bits that aren't can't produce enough food for everyone, so the world decides to fight over it. A futuristic European Union matches itself up to the Pan Asian Coalition, and both sides are packing heavy weaponry to ensure winning. So expect Battlefield 2 but with better visuals and future-world hardware like mechs and laser rifles. The studio has been hush so far, plus this feels a bit like milking the franchise, but as more details emerge it'll be more clear whether to get excited over this announcement or not.



GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER [MULTI]

With the PC version delayed and a 360 version mysteriously absent locally, we can only imagine what playing a US Army super soldier is like – with HDR. Advanced Warfighter charges the player to save the President of the United States. You play as a unique new type of soldier equipped with all sorts of fancy equipment. Advanced Warfighter has long been a poster child for 'next-generation' graphics and perhaps gameplay on these new consoles. The console version specifically looks interesting, taking a third-person approach instead of the PC-centric first-person. Each experience has apparently been custom-tailored to take advantage of the native control scheme.



LOST PLANET [360]

Capcom seems intent on pushing unique IP this year, Dead Rising aside. Lost Planet certainly looks detailed enough to merit being called 'next-gen', but it's the production values that really interest us. With a plot akin to that found in a Final Fantasy game (mythical ice monster beasts and high-tech battle suits), Lost Planet will apparently have Live-enabled online cooperative battles, tied into the vehicle based combat. You can jump in and out of any of the heavily armed vehicles and then trudge around the vast arctic environments. Considering Lost Planet is being produced by the same people who created the Onimusha and Devil May Cry series, it is definitely one to keep an eye on.



ROGUE TROOPER [MULTI]

James is a complete and utter fanboy, which is why this is listed here. While the previous Judge Dredd game failed to ignite the fires of passion for our favourite MegaCity cop, Rogue Trooper is currently shaping up to be quite authentic. Helm, Gunnar and Bagman, Rogue's friends brought back to life in his equipment, are all usable. Eidos is trying its best to keep the game true to the original 2000AD series: the story of a man who can appear out of thin air, take out whole platoons and then disappear back into the shadows. The game will support online multiplayer action, as well as vehicular combat. But we don't care about any of that; we're just interested in the Kill-Moves, a system that made the Punisher game so much fun.



Developer: Monolith
Publisher: Sega
Distributor: WWE (011) 462-0150
Genre: Horror FPS
Platform: PC | 360
Release: Q2 2006

CONDEMNED: CRIMINAL ORIGINS

THE RELEASE OF F.E.A.R. marked the return of one of gaming's most endearing PS developers. Monolith has seen its ups and downs, but its fans have remained faithful - if perhaps not to the notorious Littech engine. But the paranormal action of F.E.A.R. heralded a new age. F.E.A.R. players will definitely notice how similar the two games look. Some have even wondered if it takes place in the F.E.A.R. universe, though there is no indication of that. The terrain is familiar though. Players assume the role of Ethan Thomas, an F.B.I. agent with the Serial Crimes Unit. He has to track the serial killers who stalk human prey and leave cryptic clues when they feel like it. In this case the killer is The Matchmaker, a killer whose MO is to leave the corpse of a young woman having dinner with a mutilated store dummy. But the plot quickly escalates into something stranger.

There are definite similarities between Monolith's two latest games in terms of plot elements, but Condemned is a completely different title. The world

is based in a Seven and Silence of the Lambs style of world where dark, murky locations and silent, creepy corridors are everywhere. The world in Condemned is very detailed and high-end PCs will be able to push it to the level seen on the 360 release.

It compliments the horror atmosphere that Condemned projects. Agent Thomas is soon implicated in the killings and he has to go solo to prove his innocence. Meanwhile, the city seems to have gone mad and criminals, junkies, bums, bikers and insane firemen stalk you, or sometimes come storming head-on. At its heart, Condemned is about finding a serial killer and the tools come to match. Not making things overly complicated, a clue is highlighted with the relative visual area sharpening. One button brings out the right forensic tools. These allow Thomas to detect various elements on the crime scene such as chemicals, fingerprints, blood and so forth. A digital camera takes a picture of evidence and a mobile phone keeps you in touch with a lab technician. The story flow is much





more subtle and constructed than F.E.A.R., which emphasizes that this isn't an action title.

That said, it is violent. The madness, which is tied to the story, brings enemy encounters that are brutal to say the least. Ammunition is very rare and pistols and shotguns should be used sparingly. Instead players must tear pipes off walls or pick up two-by-fours, all used to beat assailants senseless. In a tip of the hat to Riddick, Condemned's melee combat is meaty and intense, and a lot of fun. It's a mix between in-your-face action, point-and-click detective work and nail-biting progress through decayed and dark locations. With dozens of different types of weapons to pick up and use, including fire axes and a tazer, the combat is fairly robust. Some weapons swing slower but harder, while others are better for quick blows. It's also possible to grab weapons from stunned opponents and at a specific moment perform execution moves such as snapping the assailant's neck.

Beyond all of this lies the larger story and the Matchmaker's own plans. The 360 version has met with a lot of praise and even nabbed a few awards. After F.E.A.R.'s impressive PC appearance, it's unlikely that PC users, at least top-end system owners, will be short-changed with Condemned, and PC gamers can expect one of the scariest thriller titles in years to arrive soon. **NAG**



PLAY THE HOTTEST GAME WITH POWERFUL ASUS GRAPHICS CARD

ASUS EAX1900XTX Breaks Single-Card Configuration Record on 3DMark05



PETER JACKSON'S KING KONG THE OFFICIAL GAME OF THE MOVIE



To fully enjoy the breathtaking visual effects of the latest 3D titles, a powerful graphics card is a must. The ASUS EAX1900XTX recently became the first video solution to break 3DMark05's 10,000-point barrier, setting a new record for single-card configuration.

With such explosive video performance, the EAX1900XTX, based on ATI's flagship Radeon X1900XTX VPU (video processing unit), was selected as the official graphics solution for "King Kong" the game. This exciting new game is now bundled together with the all-new EAX1900XTX to deliver a valuable package that takes advantage of the very best of gaming and video technologies.

In addition to industry-leading specifications, the EAX1900XTX also incorporated exclusive innovations for interactive gaming and image enhancement.

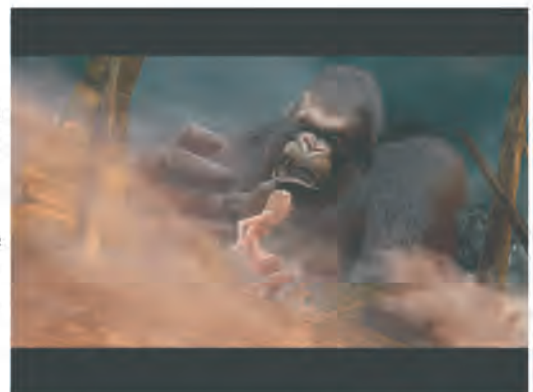
ASUS GameReplay: Practice makes perfect, and that holds true in gaming as well. For popular LAN (local area network) party team games such as Counter Strike and Unreal Tournaments, strategy is the key to victory. GameReplay records gaming action into MPEG4 video files so that teams can review all the moves and tactics to improve for the next tournament. The recorded files can also be used as screen savers or posted on blogs.

GameLiveShow: Just like people who share their lives and thoughts on blogs, expert gamers want to show off their perfectly executed strategies and five-hit combinations. GameLiveShow is created to allow gamers to stream broadcast their gaming experiences live over the Internet. Other players can now go online to check out how the experts really do it.

GameFace Messenger: It is a user-friendly interface similar to those of the most popular messenger services for simplifying the process of inviting players to gameferences (game conferences). Register, log on and start the fun. GameFace Messenger is as easy as the free messenger services currently in the market.

Splendid Video Intelligence Technology: Built into the driver of ASUS graphics cards, Splendid detects activation and usage of video applications and automatically optimizes image quality for the best visual results. Splendid further provides five modes for best visual results in different video applications (Standard, Game, Theater, Scenery and Night)

Gamers, you are in luck. You can now get the best single-card graphics solution and this year's hottest game, "King Kong", in a one package. Combined with unique features that enhance player interaction, the EAX1900XTX is the ideal solution for serious players.



▲ Re-live the exhilarating movie scenes with the power of EAX1900XTX.



The name is Rodriguez.
Rico Rodriguez. License to
overthrow



JUST CAUSE

SOME CAREER PROSPECTS STRIKE us as something you were destined to do. Professional Yeti hunting is one example, regime change is another. Or you could be a mercenary sent off to a Third-World island to help facilitate the latest coup d'état. But being sent by the CIA to do its dirty work and get someone off the presidential throne is something else. This is the job of Rico Rodriguez in *Just Cause*, the game that wowed E3 audiences last year with nothing more than an impressive engine that only showed off landscape technology. But this is important. *Just Cause* will have 1,225 square miles (just shy of 2,000 square kilometres) of terrain on an island Republic that our man Rico will have full access to.

Can you say 'GTA'? There's little denying that *Just Cause* lifted its sandbox idea from Rockstar's series. But then we might as well call *Half-Life* an *Ultima Underworld* (or at the very least *Doom*) clone. The sandbox system is alive and well, though Avalanche wants to add a lot more ability for players to influence the game world. In fact, that's the whole point: Rico has been tasked with the overthrow of the

At least South American countries are popular for foreign interferences. Imagine if all of this was snow



government of South American island state San Esperito, by any means necessary. But this is a busy island. Apart from the government forces and politicians, not to mention CIA agents, there are also rebels and drug syndicates.

At face value, Just Cause plans to have around twenty main missions towards taking out the powers that be. But this is part of a much vaster 300-plus missions. These are handed out by the various factions in the game, which help build alliances that Rico can use (obviously finding favour with one group can make you less popular with another). This ties in with the versatility the game is aiming for. There are various ways to complete missions and these are largely determined by the open nature of the game. They tell you what to blow up, but not specifically how. This means that the game can be mixed up and the regime change of San Esperito will be new the first couple of times you play the game.

All this takes place on a massive island with towns, beaches, jungles, mountains and more (the developers claim there will be no loading in-game). It might briefly remind you of Boiling Point, but the gameplay is more inspired by GTA's movie laws. For instance, Rico can skydive, land on the back of a truck, pull out the driver and hijack the vehicle – all without touching the ground. There will be over 100 vehicles and around 25 weapons, but with 2,000 square kilometres there are bound to be lots of secrets (apparently the island takes an average of 40 minutes to cross).

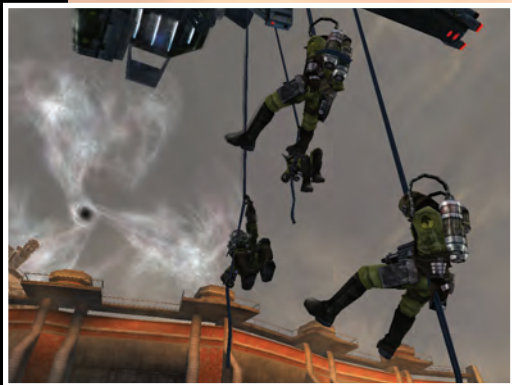
The graphic fidelity, though, makes us wonder if the PS2 (and maybe even Xbox) version will be up to scratch. But the PC and 360 versions are likely to be impressive. Let's just hope that Avalanche doesn't fall into the traps often seen by games that take the sandbox genre a bit too seriously (like Boiling Point) or make it too rigid (like Total Overdose). But it certainly looks huge and holds a lot of promise. **NAG**

Developer: Avalanche Studios **Publisher:** Eidos **Distributor:** WWE (011) 462 0150 **Genre:** Sandbox Action **Platforms:** PC, PS2, Xbox, 360 **Release:** Q3 2006

ROGUE TROOPER

2000 AD FANS NEED no introduction to 'Blue', the genetic soldier of the future officially known as the Rogue Trooper. He has been a mainstay of the British comic series since 1981, and has seen an entire universe carved for him by some of the top talent in the industry. But outside these circles you'd be hard-pressed to find pop references. Rogue Trooper has always been an edgy and violent series, so Saturday morning cartoons and lunchbox merchandise were never part of his gig. No community announcements that kids should read more and definitely not a big mascot for family values, unless you count a blue guy breathing chemical smog as symbolic for something.

The story of a genetic trooper and his three counterpart bio-chips (each with the stored personality of a fallen genetic brother in arms) starts as Blue and other genetic troopers are dropped into battle on the war-torn planet Nu-Earth. But a traitor informed the forces of the Norts of these new troopers, who can breath the noxious gasses of the contaminated planet surface, and the enemy retaliates with a blow that kills almost all of the troopers – all but one. In the first game, players will take the role of Blue as he goes after the traitor, now a general in the Nort army. Fans will spot that this is also the first story in the Rogue Trooper canon, indicating that there might be future RT titles if the first proves successful. Initially Gunnar, Helm and Bagman are fellow soldiers that help Blue with the early missions. But they die and become the three chips that aid him on his missions. Gunnar is the AI for Blue's weapon and he can be set as a sentry point as well. Helm, sitting in Blue's helmet, can project holograms and hack consoles. Bagman (guess where)



Developer: Rebellion Publisher: SCI Distributor: MegaRom (011) 234 2680 Genre: Action/Tactical Platforms: PS2, Xbox, PC Release: May 2006

can deploy micro mine-fields and manufacture equipment and goods from scrap parts Blue finds through the game.

That's a lot of function for a run-and-gun title, isn't it? It's a trick question, just in case Rogue Trooper looked like another overblown action applicant. Make no mistake about it, if the game follows the comic, things will be violent and action-packed. But the developer wants to emphasize the soldier role more. Blue is genetically well ahead of his opponents, so one-on-one or even two- or three-on-one battles are naturally to his advantage. That's why squads of four or more soldiers patrol Nu Earth. These patrols can also be alerted to activity around them, depending on how close and what alerted them. When Blue encounters one or more squads, CPU power is moved towards their AI functions, with less and less given to squads that are further away – to the point where they just patrol. Thus, a squad just on the other side of the ridge poses a much bigger threat than a team walking a long distance away.

As such, Blue has to deploy some strategy. The micro-mines, holograms and sentry gun placements are all geared towards ambush tactics, during which Blue can charge in and clean up the business. But simply taking on well-armed Nort soldiers in overwhelming numbers will just bring

quick death. There appears to be a lot of input from the comic side. Since Blue can breathe the poison air and not get burned by acid, he can use these in his advantage. Puncturing the air tank on a Nort soldier's environment suit is an entertaining way to get an instant kill. Using the cutting-edge particle systems in the Asura engine means that dust and chemical storms are likely to work in Blue's favour as well. There are also special kill moves for when a soldier gets too close for his comfort. And don't expect Nort soldiers with air packs. The Nu-Earth conflict is sheer madness, so there are colourful characters and some seriously heavy-duty enemies.

The story was scripted by Gordon Rennie, who has spent the past five years of his career working on Rogue Trooper. Fans will delight in various comic areas being incarnated into the game, while newcomers can expect a blend of action and tactics in a fleshed-out and violent universe. We're a bit concerned that visually the game doesn't look that great, plus Rebellion's enthusiastic but ultimately lacking Dredd vs. Death leaves us a bit lacking in faith. Rogue Trooper is an excellent franchise to bring to games and if done right, will wow fans and woo newbies. So here's hoping it's done right. **NAG**



Not a member of the Blue Man Group and at least three times as lethal!

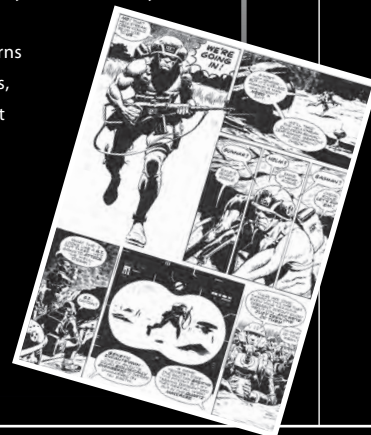


THE COMIC

Rogue Trooper was created by Gerry Finley-Day and Dave Gibbons, debuting in 2000 AD in 1981. Known as a G.I. (Genetic Infantryman), the trooper goes after a traitor general that caused most of his genetic brothers to be massacred on the battlefield. But true to his moniker, protagonist Blue, along with his three

biochips Gunnar, Bagman and Helm for company, head out to NuEarth to try and find peace for himself in a war-torn world. But being genetically built to be a soldier, that's not easy, and Blue encounters a lot of different enemies, friends, places and plots as he travels the planet. The war between the Norts and Southerns rages on and Blue is also sought by Souther military police for going A.W.O.L.

The series has had many twists and turns and even contradicts itself in a few places, the hallmark of a series that has seen a lot of different artists and writers work on it. Rogue Trooper's popularity even saw it get a game in 1991 for the Atari ST, while Games Workshop also released a board game in 1987. But RT has always lived in the shadow of other 2000 AD greats like Judge Dredd and Strontium Dogs, leaving it off the beaten path for a lot of mainstream comic readers.





Platform: PC Developer: Introversion Publisher: TBA Supplier: TBA

DEFCON

LAST YEAR IN APRIL, NAG reviewed a little game called Darwinia. With its unique retro-styling and a penchant for prodding halcyon memories of a simpler gaming time, Darwinia captured our hearts (and the hearts of the world, if the awards Darwinia won are anything to go by).

Not one to rest on its laurels, Introversion has been quite busy on their next game: Defcon.

The premise behind Defcon is stupidly simple: the game simulates Global Thermonuclear War.

Inspired by the film Wargames, the game doles out points scored by successfully launching a nuclear attack on enemy civilian population. This task is made complex because launching an attack on the enemy opens you up to counter-attack. Ground silos, submarines and bombers all give away their positions the moment a nuke is launched.

Chris Delay, lead developer for Introversion stated: "We're playing this game everyday and people keep coming up with new strategies, but the bottom-line is it's very difficult to win convincingly. Games often end with both sides obliterated. It's a fascinating and

nervous game to play."

"We've gone for a very minimal atmosphere, with some wonderful ambient music playing, written by Alistair Lindsay and Michael Maidment - the same guys who did the awesome Darwinia audio. There's very little in-game sound except deep rumbles when nukes hit. It's like you're ten miles underground in a bunker, bringing the world to an end one city at a time, completely detached from the millions of deaths you are causing."

As the game pans out, more and more thermonuclear rock-lobbing causes a worldwide cause-and-effect counter-launching - a very poignant tip of the hat to the movie of inspiration.

"Watching the movie, it dawned on me that there was a really cool game idea in that movie, and that nobody had really attempted it. There are some games which successfully simulate warfare across the world, but they tend to be too heavily strategic, e.g. turn-based and stat heavy. I wanted to see a game that looked like the movie, with vector-lined Soviet subs closing in on your coastline. Most of all I

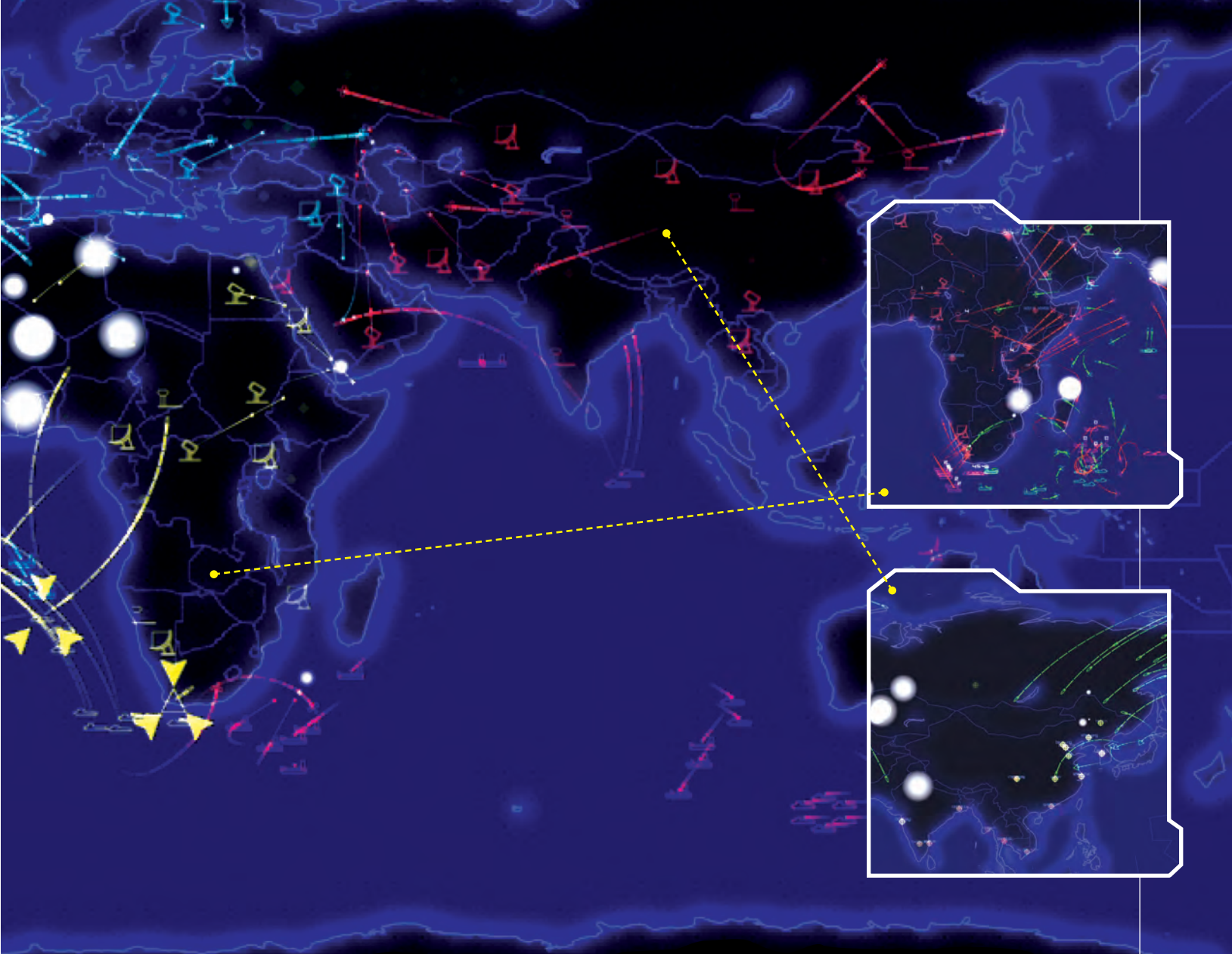
wanted to recreate that tension and paranoia."

Defcon marks Introversion's first multiplayer game. Darwinia was originally planned to have multiplayer from the start, but time and resources prevented this. Ironically, Darwinia actually runs on a multiplayer style server-client system behind the scenes and was intended to be multiplayer only.

Defcon has been developed from this multiplayer functionality, lending to its short development time - six months compared to the three years it took to develop Darwinia.

Part of its multiplayer method is the rather interesting idea of an 'Office Mode' multiplayer mode.

"We're very excited by Office Mode. The basic idea is that a group of work-mates can start the game up in the morning in Office Mode, playing over their local area network. The game takes place entirely in real-time. You can quite easily end the world with nuclear conflict in eight hours and each player controls one territory, e.g. North America or Russia. You can hit the Panic key - press



escape twice - which immediately removes the game from the screen and places a discreet icon in your system tray. That icon changes when important things happen. For example, if you detect some nuclear launches the icon will flash as a nuke for a few seconds. Because everything is taking place in real-time, you've got at least 30 minutes before those nukes land, so you've got plenty of time to respond without interfering with your real work too much."

A complex 'Alliance' system keeps the players in balance. If six players were to fight each other, the result would be chaos. Introversion is allowing players to form alliances and play (for example) three versus three. Each individual player still aims to win. Their score is independent of their alliances' progress, and players can betray their alliances. Switching to the opponents' team can happen, if the player can convince the enemy to permit it (this is determined by a vote of all the players of the destination alliance). Introversion predicts that the game will get quite ugly with

players attempting to line up a perfect attack on a team-mate before betraying them and striking at a key moment.

"There's going to be a lot of paranoia in alliance games. We've got in-game IRC between players - public and private - and we've noticed lots of 'wheeling and dealing' in the games we've played, with players desperately trying to secure their alliances. We've seen alliance members shooting friendly planes down because they believed the planes were scouting the area for targets in preparation for a strike. This resulted in arguments on the chat channels, followed by skirmishes at sea, followed by retaliation, before finally the whole alliance collapsed and everyone started nuking the hell out of each other. It's awesome."

It's worth noting that the alliances and betrayals are all options that can be changed depending on the tastes of the players.

Being a multiplayer-centric game, Defcon won't have any traditional single-player. It will have bot-match. You can include as many bots as you like and

play against them on your own. A standard tutorial will get players up to speed if needed, before they run out to cause the next apocalypse.

A standard game of Defcon takes about 30 to 40 minutes to play out, according to Introversion. The game speed can be set at the start: from real-time right up to 20 times real-time. Interestingly enough, multiplayer game speed is determined by the slowest requested speed. The game starts at Defcon 5, which is lowered every few minutes until it hits Defcon 1. At each stage the player's options expand. For example, you can only fire nukes in Defcon 1, you can only engage the enemy at Defcon 3 or higher, while enemy territory is only approachable at Defcon 4 and up. This allows for a slow build-up, rather than a quick click-fest right off the bat.

"Defcon is a thinking man's game, so we don't want to give any serious advantages to the person who can click the quickest."

Introversion is hoping for an April release, though this is not set in stone. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

■ Developer

Obsidian

■ Publisher

Atari

■ Distributor

Megarom (011) 234-2680

■ Genre

CRPG

■ Release Date

2006

The forgotten Realms are all but that, especially with another NWN game on the way

NEVERWINTER NIGHTS 2



MAN, HOW LONG HAS this series been running? Let's take it back to the modern CRPG's Adam: Baldur's Gate. Out of that revolution in digital RPGs, which overshadows even the open playing field of the Fallout series, came Baldur's Gate 2, Icewind Dale and eventually Neverwinter Nights. If we leave the Forgotten Realms for a minute, there's also Planescape: Torment and Knights of the Old Republic. The basic idea has stayed the same and while the game systems evolved and the stories and environments became richer, you still see the same ideas that started with Baldur's Gate still running in the background.

So, as such, don't expect any major surprises with Neverwinter Nights 2, but a further expansion on the CRPG ideals. Bioware, being too busy with partnerships and projects, has handed its development to Obsidian, the team that also delivered KOTOR 2. This is perhaps good news for those who weren't keen on Jade Empire's paradigms, since Obsidian isn't likely to stray far off the line here. As the name suggests, the action once again takes place around the city of Neverwinter, though players can expect a much bigger hub that is more alive. If anything, NWN 2 wants to be the prettiest damn RPG around, at least until Bioware debuts Mass Effect. The city will be larger with new areas, and the graphical detail surpasses anything Bioware and its contemporaries have achieved so far.

Using the 3.5 rule set as closely as possible, the game includes new prestige classes as well as those from the first game and expansions.

The Warlock class has also been included, as well as several new playable races (including the Drow). Heavier focus has been placed on spellcaster classes, making them more appealing, and several prestige classes are geared specifically towards magic. There are

literally hundreds of spells, including those seen in the series before.

To put up a fight there will be seventy different monster types that are scalable, so that makes for a few hundred combinations in itself. Unfortunately the levels are capped at 20, for balance reasons, though Obsidian says there are plenty of lateral ways to

expand a character, including revamped alchemy and crafting systems for making new items. Players can also buy and expand strongholds. Still, this puts a damper on importing any NWN characters you've been keeping safe. As seen in the KOTOR games, there will be ten supporting characters. Three can join the main character at a time, so choosing the right party for the right job is essential.

Fans are probably going to be happy, but there isn't much sign of any new ground being broken, other than making the world more detailed. Still, it's not a flawed system, so with doubts about originality and level capping aside, Neverwinter Nights 2 is likely to deliver exactly what we want from it. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

■ Developer

Rocksteady Studios

■ Publisher

Eidos

■ Distributor

WWE

■ Genre

Action

■ Release Date

2006



Clearly the gangs of the future have a ski-mask fetish

URBAN CHAOS: RIOT RESPONSE

A FEW YEARS AGO, MUCKY Foot released an underrated action title called Urban Chaos. Appearing on the Dreamcast, PC and PlayStation, it enjoyed modest success. But the developer collapsed after its other title, the excellent Startopia, failed to spark enough sales. It's just a titbit of history, because other than its name, Urban Chaos: Riot Response has nothing to do with the original game. Even development falls under the auspices of Rocksteady Studios, established by former Argonaut employees and funded by Eidos' new owner, SCI.

So this has nothing to do with the 1999 game, except for Eidos bringing the name back. But this hardly detracts from what looks to be a solid and pretty violent shooter. The action takes place in a near-future city that is based on New York. Nick Mason, a former military man, returns home to find the place overrun with dangerous gangs all fighting for control. So he does what any proud game character would do. He joins T-Zero, otherwise known as the G18 Counter-Gang division. This gives him license to stomp, kick, beat, shoot and tazer. The bad guys, of course, will try and return the favour.

Despite all the nonsense the anti-game pundits are spewing,

it does highlight the lack of games that feature law enforcement officers as the protagonist. That's usually because games go beyond the call of duty or legal limits. Either way, police brutality with extreme prejudice is necessary for a good action title. In Urban Chaos players can expect that.

In a twist to give the game a bit more depth, Mason will spend a fair amount of time with other emergency officers. Often he'll fight alongside other riot cops trying to beat back gangs. Other missions have co-op elements, such as guiding a fireman through a building while he breaks down doors with his axe. But this won't be a simulator of what to do in case of an emergency. It's war.

The bad guys essentially come in various flavours of gangs. The one known of at this stage is The Burners, a bunch of guys who just love a bit of fire with their activities. Each gang has a theme, pushing the over-the-top idea of the game. Think of a B-grade action movie.

Mason, on the other hand, has a riot shield. The semi-transparent shield can be brought down with one button and is useful for deflecting shots, hitting opponents or navigating

level obstacles like a leaking gas line spewing flames. Judging from the videos, the shield adds a very meaty feel to the game and the developers insist it's a very integral part of the game. As a cop, Mason will be rewarded with medals if he reaches certain objectives or if he brings in perpetrators alive. These translate into medals, which open up new upgrades and gear in the game, with a heavy focus on weapon upgrades.

It's still early days and visually Riot Response doesn't look that great yet. But it definitely looks engaging and if it ends up being what it promises to be, action fans should have a blast. **NAG**



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VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

■ Developer

SCEE

■ Publisher

SCEE

■ Distributor

Ster Kinekor Games (011) 445-7900

■ Genre

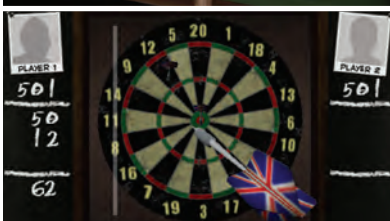
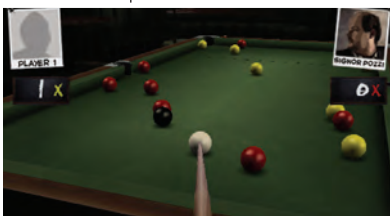
Sandbox

■ Release Date

2006



Play games in the pub, beat up local gangs or just hang around London as a tourist



REMEMBER THE GANG WARFARE bit in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas? That bit where you have to take territories, and then defend them using your gang members? No?

Well, Gangs of London is that idea, developed into a stand-alone game.

Unsurprisingly, the game takes place in the streets of London. The player, using a combination of action and strategy, takes on the gangs in a bid for dominance. You pick one of five gangs, then brawl it out against the other gangs.

At its core, the game is action-centric. Third-person, you run, shoot and get into vehicles pretty much the same as any GTA before it. Each mission is segmented up with graphic-novel narratives in-between, telling the back-story of the gangs.

Each mission puts you in control of yourself, and a whole team of gangsters. You can hot-swap between any of the characters, and issue commands to the rest of the team. Gangs of London will have 60 missions, filled with guns, driveable vehicles and the ability to play the mission from five different perspectives – one for each gang.

Despite all the action, Gangs of London is actually a turn-based strategy game. Overlaid over all the action, and quite new to the PSP, the choices made in the strategy overlay influence the eventual missions on ground level. This Gang Battle mode plays out on an interactive map of London where you attack and defend patches of London. Incorporated into this, is yet another genre – Collectable Card Game. These 'bonus cards' can be used to turn the tide of battle, strengthen areas and so forth. All of the moves are made 'blind'. Players can't see what the other players/CPU opponents are doing. All the moves unfold simultaneously at the end of the turn.

Making provision for those who don't want to get quite that involved, there is a Free Roaming mode. This mode lets you explore the streets of London on your own terms, with your pick of character, weather, vehicle, weapons and mission objectives.

In a more humorous twist, you can also play a Tourist mode. In this mode, you play an overweight American tourist, complete with paunch, colourful shirt and conspicuous camera. In this

mode you're tasked to explore the city and take photos of the city's most infamous landmarks. This isn't without reward: photos will unlock extras for the game.

There is even a Knowledge mode where you have to take a test to see how well you know London. You drive a taxi and following the major street signposts, you get graded on how well you know each side-street, road and thoroughfare.

Our own hands-on with the game revealed a tight experience, polished and cohesive. The controls were a bit dodgy. Sometimes buttons wouldn't work and the camera would swing around as if it had a mind of its own, but this may all just be a result of early preview code.

The vehicles handle surprisingly responsive, much weightier than their counterparts in the PSP version of Grand Theft Auto.

There is no doubt that Gangs of London was inspired by GTA in more ways than one, but SCEE has made the game its own by letting players battle wirelessly for the streets of London.

Gangs of London seems to be a solid experience for PSP owners who like a little depth to their portable gaming. **NAG**



7+

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Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | GCN |

Developer

Pipeworks Software

Publisher

Midway

Distributor

Ster Kinekor Games (011) 445-7900

Genre

Arcade Action

Release Date

Q2 2006

The only animal cruelty here is on humans. The creatures are all represented to give cities beatings



RAMPAGE: TOTAL DESTRUCTION

S EVEN CITIES! THIRTY MONSTERS! Total Destruction!

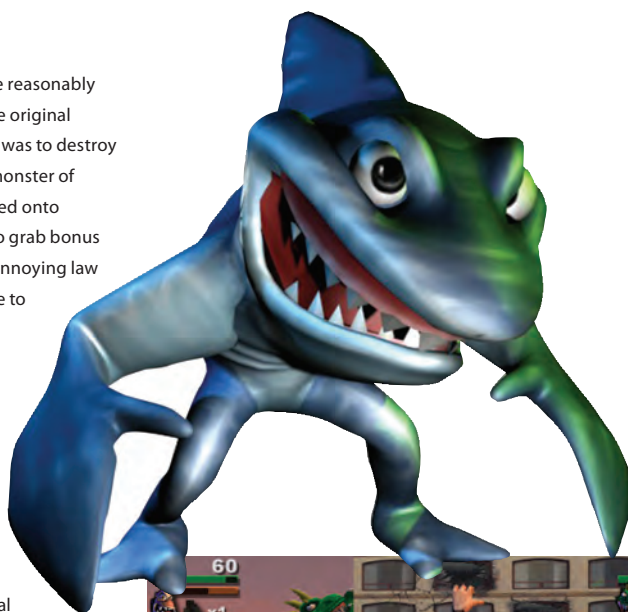
Pardon us for sounding excited. You have to be reasonably old in game terms to remember or have played the original Rampage, a classic from 1986 where the objective was to destroy everything on the screen. Choosing the colossal monster of your choice (back then there were two), you jumped onto buildings and beat them to pieces, pausing only to grab bonus items from holes in the buildings, swatting away annoying law enforcement efforts to stop you and eating people to regain your strength.

Total Destruction is no different, just newer. Retro gameplay mechanics are back, the only real innovation being the icing added through the advances of technology. Well, if it isn't broken... Rampage started with Activision, though the last two spin-offs in the series, Puzzle Attack and Rampage 2, came from Midway. So it's strange, but welcome to see the two original games, Rampage and Rampage: WorldTour, appear in Total Destruction's bonus section.

But back to the game at hand. This is really just a cosmetic update. There are seven cities ranging from New York and Los Angeles to Hong Kong and London (no Tokyo?), each divided into several stages. The aim is to destroy and thanks to today's consoles, that means more destruction than the series has ever seen before.

The characters are all different creatures, ranging from the original Godzilla and King Kong clones to giant squids, crocodiles, sharks and far more unnatural concoctions. Variation comes mostly in the form of jumping, slapping and speed. Some character are much faster and higher leapers, but do less damage and take more time to take down a building. But they can nimbly navigate problems slower characters will struggle with (like lots of police helicopters). Additional power attacks can be unlocked, though these are identical for all the characters.

Thus, to maximise fun on a game that offers little in variation,

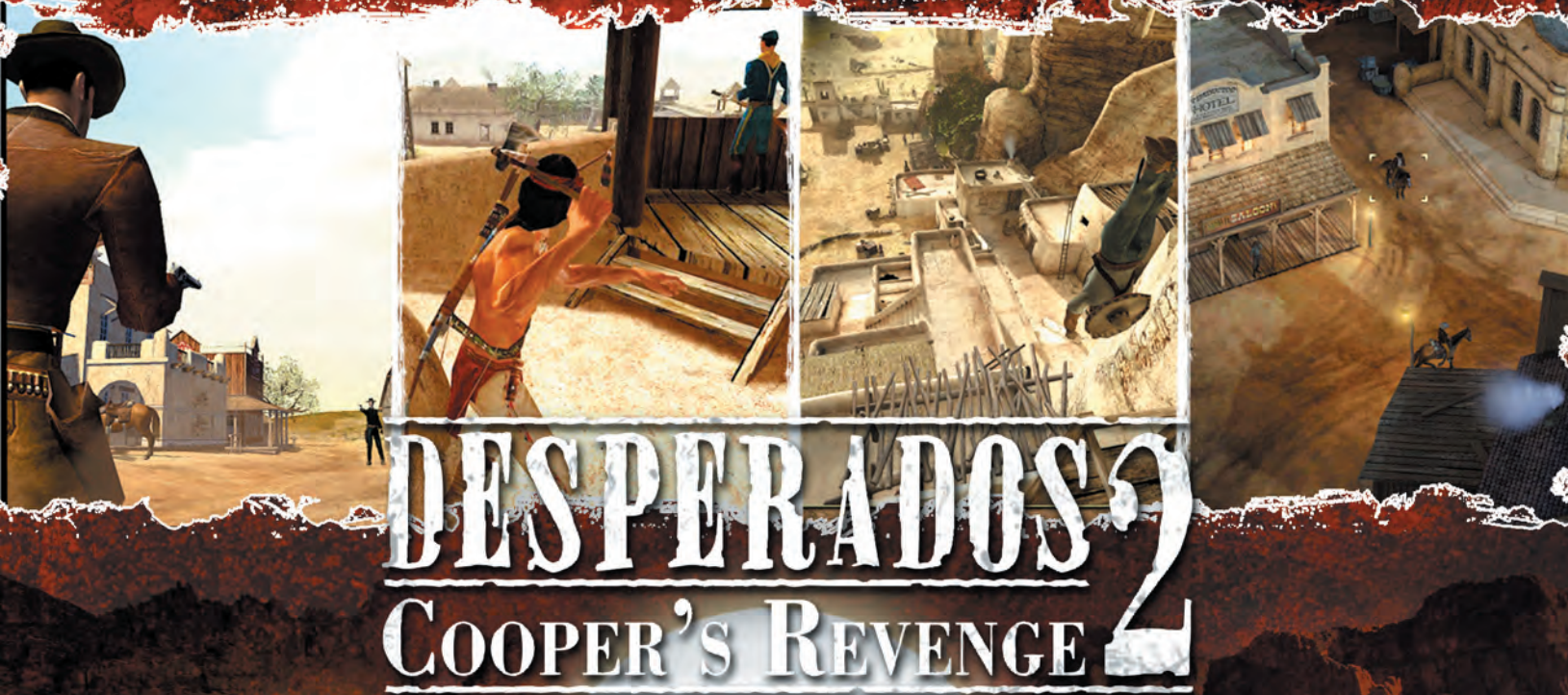


multiplayer is key. The campaign can be played co-op (or four players on a GameCube), plus there are several multiplayer modes and a timed section. Drop-in gameplay will be supported, so anyone can jump in when they arrive.

It's Rampage's 20th anniversary. High time for an update to one of the best mindless destruction games of the eighties. **NAG**



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REVIEWS

WEB SCORES [Correct at time of printing]

THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION [PC]

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| NAG [100] | 90 |
| Metacritic [100] | 93 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 92.7 |



GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE [PS2]

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| NAG [100] | 69 |
| Metacritic [100] | 71 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 71 |



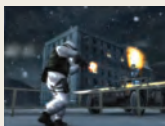
D&D ONLINE: STORMREACH [PC]

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| NAG [100] | 70 |
| Metacritic [100] | 75 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 77 |



BATTLEFIELD 2: MODERN COMBAT [PC]

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| NAG [100] | 74 |
| Metacritic [100] | 79 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 80.5 |



CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS [PS2]

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| NAG [100] | 70 |
| Metacritic [100] | 71 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 71.6 |



AMERICA'S ARMY: RISE OF A SOLDIER [XBOX]

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| NAG [100] | 68 |
| Metacritic [100] | 70 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 69.5 |



AMPED 3 [360]

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| NAG [100] | 70 |
| Metacritic [100] | 72 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 75 |



LOTR: BATTLE FOR MIDDLE-EARTH II [PC]

| | |
|--------------------|------|
| NAG [100] | 77 |
| Metacritic [100] | 84 |
| Gamerankings [100] | 84.3 |



The ratings in this section, apart from the NAG ratings, are not the opinion of NAG Magazine. Duh.

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68



93



82

84

WHAT WE'RE PLAYING...



POKER [REAL LIFE]

There was once, a long time ago, an existence without videogames. In those dark days people kept themselves busy with things other than blasting pixels into oblivion, or enacting second-lives in a fantasy realm. Those were the days of board and card games. One such game, probably invented by drunken cowboys, is Poker. The name has probably just been slightly altered over the years. In Poker, people sit around a table and drink. There may be cards involved at some point, and money gets put in a pile at the centre of the table. Whatever the case may be, we're all-in.



SPARTAN: TOTAL WARRIOR [PS2]

This little gem of a game didn't quite get the limelight it deserved, overshadowed both by the release of similar-genre game God of War, and by its tagged-on namesake. Produced by Creative Assemblé and the people who developed Total War, it's no wonder most gamers passed Spartan by. At first glance it may look like another RTS war-game, but in reality it's a solid brawler more in the vein of Dynasty Warriors — but set in ancient mythical-edged Sparta. Big power moves, impressive enemy counts and a ruthless barrage of combos edge Spartan into our 'underappreciated' list.



86

AWARDS

EDITOR'S CHOICE

This prestigious award gets bestowed upon games that really catch NAG's collective eye. The Editor's Choice award is for games that have some indefinable trait that just make them stand head and shoulders above the rest, peering about nervously. Usually, games that are fun, visually stunning and which leave a lasting impression are honoured with the coveted Editor's Choice. It's almost similar to knighthood, but not as humiliating!



74



80

CLASSIC AWARD

Any game that scores above 85% gets the much-envied Classic Award in honour of its achievement. Above 85% represents a game that has managed to set itself apart from the crowd of mediocrity – a game worthy of some attention. Games awarded the Classic Award are games you can trust.



90



88

SCORING

NAG is different, NAG is special. We score games on the 50% principle, meaning that we regard 50% as 'average'. It's neither here, nor there. 50% is the perfect middle ground. A game that scores 50% is a game that does nothing wrong, but nothing right either. If a game won't install properly, naturally it scores less than 50%. If a game brings something new to the table, or does what it does well, it'll go up from the 50% average. 60% is above average, a game that might appeal to some. 70% is a game that's pushing its own limits slightly, one that's perhaps putting a new spin on common ideas. 80% represents a game with a difference, one of quality and as few rough edges as possible. 90% is outstanding, a game that has separated itself from the horde to do its own thing, and does it well. No game will ever achieve 100%, because if a game ever did, we'd be out of jobs. Nobody would play anything else anyway.



FULL AUTO [360]

Despite the massive slowdowns the early Xbox Live demo had, the retail game is blissfully lacking this flaw. Full Auto is basically Deathtrack (1989) revisited, but if you're one of the younger gamers perhaps calling it "Burnout meets Flatout plus guns" will make more sense. Fully (more fully than usual) destructible environments with massive explosions and some interesting game-modes have kept us racing into the night. It probably helps that Full Auto does out Live Achievements left right and centre with little effort, but we're not score whores, really.



LEMMINGS [PSP]

"It's nostalgia, more than anything," said one NAG staff member. The timeless classic is revisited on the PSP, and while it's nothing special, it's still special to us. As a game, Lemmings is still one of the most loved and vexing puzzlers there is. But in today's world of HDR and online play, the PSP reincarnation seems a little out of place. But we're still of the opinion that no matter how old, blowing up all the Lemmings with the nuke option is blissful revenge for the little bastards being so dumb.




AGE OF EMPIRES 3 [PC]

Our resident collectable-card-game player (who just loves Magic: The Gardening) can't get enough of Age of Empires 3, specifically the multiplayer aspect. The stunning visuals aside, AoE has always been a hit-or-miss affair with most gamers – you either loved it or you hated it. Indifference was met with strong criticism from either camps. Regardless, the third incarnation seems to be gathering a strong multiplayer following, both due to the game's multiplayer balance (although this is being contested online) and the CCG nature of the game.

The Elder Scrolls IV

OBLIVION

A character wearing a dark hooded cloak is riding a brown horse across a grassy hill. The scene is set at sunset or sunrise, with a warm orange and yellow glow. In the background, there is a body of water and a forested landscape. The title 'The Elder Scrolls IV OBLIVION' is displayed at the top in a stylized font, with 'OBLIVION' being significantly larger and more prominent. The overall aesthetic is that of a fantasy adventure game.

Have horse, will travel.
Freelance adventurers will love
the sweeping world in Oblivion



BLIVION, FOURTH IN THE Elder Scrolls series, has been in production since early 2002. Four years is a long time to develop a game, and one might start to wonder what Bethesda Softworks was so busy with all these years.

Despite what cynics might think (and admittedly, this reviewer included), and despite some misgivings, Bethesda Softworks was hard at work crafting an alternate reality.

Instead of the usual review format where each segment of the game gets categorised and then talked about as a group, this review will have a more linear approach – a from-start-to-finish narrative. It's the only way one can really put across just how much freedom and scope Oblivion allows its newest inhabitant - you the player.

The previous Elder Scrolls title, Morrowind, started rather unceremoniously. The player dropped at shore and was told to 'carve his own path'. A quick 'pick and choose' character creation later, the player was free to roam around the province of Morrowind to do as he or she pleased. It's a shame that in Morrowind there was no reason for the player to care.

Oblivion starts off very differently, with a fresh approach to how the first steps of a player should go. Off the bat, the player (who thus far has only chosen a race and face shape) is tricked into caring. Patrick Stewart voices the dying king of the province who, in not such a small way, proclaims the player to be important. From there a scripted and engrossing segment starts, which serves as a playground for the player. In this segment, what the player does is carefully watched by the game. The player's actions will inevitably lead to the game suggesting a character class the player should be. If the player used the bow and arrow for the most part, the choice of Ranger will be put forth, but nothing is set in stone.

The player is free to choose whatever class he wishes, or even custom create one from scratch. A player's race, chosen at start, influences many things: the starting values of attributes such as strength and speed, but also the subtle underpinnings of negotiation and social interaction. For instance, if the player chooses to be an Orc, he may find himself quite unwelcome at certain places. Taverns tend to scorn the rowdy beasts.

The character classes, however, shape your initial play style. Choosing to be a Thief will start you off with much better Sneaking and Lockpicking, but by no means is your character locked into this career. You improve skills simply by using them. If, for instance, a Thief decides to suddenly take up the bow he may become an Archer. It will simply take much longer to align to that path, than if you had picked the class to begin with.

Once the 'tutorial' segment is over, character class chosen, and the player sees sunlight for the first time, then the game truly begins. At the same time, it is here where Oblivion once again differs from Morrowind.

Oblivion has a main plot arc, to do with kings and gates to Oblivion. This main plot arc is the game story and if the player chooses a straightforward class such as a Warrior, the main story can be completed in less than seven hours. This by no means marks the end of the game. If ploughed through, the main story completes and then quietly fades away, leaving the player to do what he or she chooses. Then the player might actually start playing the real Oblivion, the true nature of the game.

So, either after finishing the main story arc or right from the start, ignoring the main story, the player is free to do as he or she chooses. Free may not be a strong enough word.

The player is compelled to be free. Oblivion tactically lures

VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PC

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R349

Developer

Bethesda Softworks

Publisher

2K Games

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games (011) 445-7900

Genre

RPG

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 3Hz

Video: ATI X800 series, NVIDIA GeForce 6800 series, or higher graphics card

RAM: 1GB RAM

HDD: 4.6GB free HDD space

CD/DVD: 8x DVD-ROM

Internet: Not required



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BOTTOM LINE

There simply isn't another RPG

like this. The freedom of choice is unparalleled. While the game may technically be niche, most gamers should be able to appreciate what Bethesda has done.

90/100

Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind



Elder Scrolls II: Daggerfall



BETTER THAN

AS GOOD AS

the player into exploring the freedoms he/she has, via cunning dialogue, alluring landmarks and more. Quite often, Oblivion will make it quite clear that the most obvious path isn't always the correct one.

On the lateral plane, there are various progressions through Oblivion. You can raise your rank at the Arena, fighting gladiatorial battles until you are eventually crowned champion. You could even start harvesting mushrooms, combining them into potions to sell either to stores or to people who need them. You may even manufacture poisons, which there is always a market for if you know where to look.

Other lucrative careers exist in the province of Cyrodiil – Mage, Warrior, Merchant, Thief, Researcher, Adventurer, Agent... almost anything the player can put his mind to and within the boundaries set by what skills allow players to do. The straightforward player might simply become a renowned Mage, specialising in summoning creatures and healing. Such a career works well in Oblivion, but when one starts being creative, one finds that there is almost an infinite number of ways to be lucrative, both monetarily and for fame. A simple skill such as Athletics, when practised to completion, allows the player to jump off the surface of water. Initially this might seem frivolous, but later, once an impassable body of piranha-filled water is discovered, such a skill will suddenly seem very fortunate.

Freedom is nothing without a world that reacts to the choices made by the player. In terms of the main story arc, there is little the player can do wrong morally. The main story arc will always complete the same way, or not at all (if the player stops perusing the quests that lead the main plot).

Each quest is carefully stored for the player, with notes and directions, so one can drop and pick up quests at whim. Only once you start along the side-paths, the sub-quests that bear no impact on the main story arc, is when one finds what choice actually means.

To take an example, without giving too much away: one can climb the Arena ladder to become champion, but what if you found the current champion and talked to him first? You might find he has a story to tell, a quest of his own he may charge you with (depending on a variety of unseen factors such as his disposition to your race, personality or Speechcraft skill). If you choose to accept his quest, you may find that you might not want to kill him to take his title after all. Or you may discover something about the champion, something he may or may not want to know about. Each of the choices you make results in an outcome. These outcomes may be beneficial, or may not.

So, for instance, you choose to not reveal anything to the champion, or even talk to him. You kill him in one-on-one combat. The game may alert you to the fact that someone noticed your bloodlust. That night, as you retire to your bed to rest, you may or



may not be approached by a representative from the Assassin's Guild. From here the possibilities spiral outwards again. Will the player take the path to the Assassin's Guild and become a creature of the night, or will the player reject the offer and continue as a Warrior?

Guilds are, on their own, also tiers the player can progress up. All the guilds have a ladder that can be climbed - the top of each ladder is an experience on its own. Becoming the leader of the Assassin's Guild, for example, may thrust a spy unwittingly into the midst of administrative and political work.

What a player is doing can, at any point, be interrupted. If a player gets tired of the mindless hack-and-slash, he can instead try his hand at politics, mercantile endeavours or even the simple task of weapons repair. Oblivion has been put together to support any choice the player makes, presenting the player with challenges and rewards for those choices and careers, no matter how fleeting.

To drive home the point that Oblivion is a game in which you live, the player can purchase houses and then adorn them with decorations, additions and more. These add-ons aren't just cosmetic either. Various additions will give the player benefits when he/she decides to rest at home. Very quickly, once a home has been purchased, players will find themselves becoming attached to the location, for both sentimental reasons and statistical reasons. Why sleep outside when you can sleep in your own bed?

For a very long time, game design has been very much a 'balance between two ideas' problem. The more detail and freedom a game provides, the more content is needed, which in turn means more work has to be done. The more work that has to be done, the lower the quality of the end result. It's a simple trade-off, but Oblivion is a prime example of how advancement in technology has made that trade-off less negative. Now, thanks to new powerful hardware and stronger computers, Bethesda can almost pack as much detail, speech and terrain into Oblivion as it wants. However, the game has to be released eventually and the result of that release is a world that is both alive, yet slightly mechanical.

The sun rises and sets beautifully in Oblivion, and the game runs at a clock roughly 100 times faster than real-time, so it is possible to watch the subtle changes of season and weather in a single game session. Visually Oblivion is unsurpassed, especially when the HDR (High Dynamic Range) option is enabled. Light bathes the landscape in colour, and the player can see for miles into the distance. Far-away snow-capped peaks can be seen from the centre of the idyllic valleys. And what you can see, you can reach.

Only the blurry distant textures give the game away, reminding the player that he/she is in a digital representation instead of the real thing. The

In the old days, when you could walk to towns, people in caves with torches were everywhere



suspension of disbelief is challenged even further by the denizens of the game. The villagers, orcs, elves, Minotaurs and such of the world are indeed detailed and, for the most part, intelligent, but they still react in predictable ways. The overall picture of the world and its living inhabitants is stunning. People go to work, eat, relax, walk home, sleep and repeat. They even go to their respective churches when the day is right. On a macro scale, the world is vibrant and alive, with every entity having its own goals. It is only on the micro scale, the closer inspection, where this illusion is less impressive.

The citizens of a town will 'live', but how they live is very mechanical. Their routines are clockwork. Not even the player can really influence them bar

outright killing them – at the cost of a hefty fine or jail sentence. Being imprisoned will reveal its own set of challenges and quests, not ironically.

So while the world seems reactive and alive, the inhabitants will always go to the same place to eat, same place to sleep and talk to the same people. The topic of conversation may change, depending on how far along the main story the player has progressed. Listening in to conversations isn't just aesthetic either. When two villagers start talking to each other in the street, fully voiced, the player may pick up on certain 'topics of conversation', which he/she can then use in conversation with others. Hearing about a distance war may in turn help you persuade a merchant to lower his prices. That is, of

course and once again, if your various skills and own ministrations (in the form of a strange mini-game involving facial animation) work in your favour

Oblivion rolls out possibilities, quests, situations and experience, both numerically for the character and emotionally for the player. Oblivion is the type of game where you don't tell your friends how cool it is. It is the type of game where you share your own experiences in the game with your friends.

While nowhere near perfect or infinite, Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion simply is the most detailed, expansive role-playing game to date. Fans of the third in the series, Daggerfall, will definitely feel more at home with Oblivion than they did with Morrowind. **NAG**





DAY/NIGHT CYCLE



Strangely, the one skill
you don't get in Oblivion
is architecture

REVIEW

THE LORD OF THE RINGS: OF THE RINGS:

THE BATTLE FOR MIDDLE EARTH II



SO, WILL REAL-TIME STRATEGY games based on the wildly successful Lord of the Rings cycle follow historical precedents and turn into a trilogy? It has not been long, as these things go, since the release of The Battle for Middle-earth from Electronic Arts, to a rather lukewarm response. Within a surprisingly short span of time, and eschewing the release of an expansion pack for that game, which has not been the norm to date, EA has released a second instalment. Does this herald the coming of a third, to complete a trilogy as it were, or will EA settle on this product, with possibly an expansion pack somewhere down the line?

ARTISTIC FLAIR

This game's design truly raises the bar on presentation. The design team has applied a very particular artistic style and created a finished product that immerses players in an intensely "Tolkienian" atmosphere. One particular artistic trick that bears mention is the use of artwork-to-animation transitions, and vice-versa. This is how it works: a narrative, delivered by Hugo Weaving (Elrond in the Lord of the Rings films, Agent Smith in The Matrix), usually starts with a still likeness of a painting, which then morphs into a game-engine-rendered action cut-scene, and ultimately freezes back into a picture. This device is used to great effect, and heightens the fantasy feel of the entire offering.

This artistically oriented approach is also evident within the game itself. The architecture most faithfully follows this trend, with amazingly modelled and rendered buildings reflecting the cultures of their builders and their appearance indicating their

state of repair and environmental influences, such as creeping vegetation or an arid climate. On the whole, the way the architecture has been represented is breathtakingly stunning. This splendour is complemented by an attention to detail that sometimes leads to sheer beauty, other times to touches of humour; for example, the troll cage now features more detail – a chained troll struggles against its shackles as a goblin seated on the roof prods it with a long, pointed stick. However, this attention to detail is not all-encompassing – while ships are beautifully rendered, with billowing sails and highly detailed woodwork, no crewmen are evident on its decks, and when the ships are wrecked, no struggling, waterlogged seamen swim for their lives in their vicinity. However, it is easy to be distracted from such omissions by effects such as the reflection of the sun on the water's surface. The design team paid particular attention to develop striking water representations, and their efforts were not in vain – this is the most realistic and breathtaking depiction of rolling oceans we have seen in any game – describing it is futile, it has to be seen to be appreciated! In a similar vein, sun reflections on ice, such as frozen rivers, is also nothing short of spectacular, particularly where the ice intermingled with dirt or rock, lending additional definition to the whole effect.

The water and reflection effects mentioned above are not the only graphical elements that earn a distinction. The models are even more detailed than in this title's predecessor, particularly the buildings. And the aesthetics are impressive too, particularly those of elven structures.

When discussing such aesthetics, we can include the aural aspect – soundtrack and sound effects. Once again the musical score is rich and emotionally laden, particularly the elven-inspired pieces, though the other themed tracks all have their own individual appeals – while the elves have an eldritch aura about their music, the dwarven compositions are hearty, and the evil-themed tracks have a savage, atavistic feel to them. On the downside, some of the evil campaign's narrative overdoes the "wicked overseer" tone and comes across a bit over-the-top. However, the rest of the presentation is smooth and slick.

IN MIDDLE-EARTH...

The single-player campaigns have a strong sense of story and epic events. They have been very well designed, and the missions are fairly diverse, as well as requiring the use of one's entire available arsenal to achieve victory. Sadly, the campaigns are rather short, and a semi-dedicated player can expect to finish both campaigns within a week, with ease. Of course, there are higher difficulty levels to try thereafter...

The building and resource models revert back to more traditional ones than those found in the original Battle for Middle-earth. Structures can be built more or less anywhere, with the exception of walls, which must remain within a certain radius of a fortress. Vestiges of the old "building plot" system remain in the form of add-ons that can be built onto the central fortress, enhancing it in some way (usually by adding extra defences). Buildings no longer gain experience,

VITAL INFO

Platforms

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R299 (Check www.take2.co.za for prices)

Developer

Electronic Arts

Publisher

Electronic Arts

Supplier

EA South Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre

RTS

Age Restriction

12+ (PEGI)

Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 1.6GHz

Video: 64 MB Video Card

RAM: 256MB RAM

HDD: 6.0 GB HDD

CD/DVD: CD/DVD

Internet: Available, not required

Players: 1-8

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BOTTOM LINE

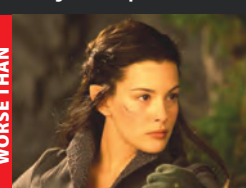
This is a breathtakingly beautiful game with great artistry and immersive atmosphere. If you enjoy the Lord of the Rings world or enjoy real-time strategy games, by all means try this one out. Its weakness is a lack of innovation in terms of game dynamic, but otherwise this game is very solid.

77/100

Kissing an Elven King



Kissing an Elven princess



BETTER THAN

WORSE THAN



MY PRECIOUS...

A limited Collector's Edition is currently available, which ships on two DVDs, and contains both bonus content and functionality. In terms of additional in-game features, the game offers owners of the Collector's Edition an exclusive custom hero builder, which allows players to design their own heroes, from appearance right through to abilities. These can then be played in single- or multi-player. In addition, this limited set also includes a bonus DVD in standard DVD format, which is to say it can be viewed on a regular DVD player. This disc contains the game's amazing musical score, videos of many of the animations, interviews with the heads of the design staff, a gallery of the game's concept art and a few other odds and ends. Finally, this box contains a poster map of Middle-earth.

gain experience are resource gathering structures, and all of these gain defensive capabilities at level three. This kind of parity is evident throughout the design of the six available factions, and this is not a strength of this game. The impression here is that the developers got too ambitious, and copped out of a proper balancing of the factions. (It is well known that, as more factions are added, it becomes increasingly difficult to balance them, as the number of interactions increases exponentially, so adding a third side adds far more than 50% of the balance work.) EA would have done better here to have left the number of factions as before, but keep them fairly distinct from each other, rather than produce these carbon-copy factions that somewhat lack their own unique identities.

Having digressed from the film plot, the designers were able to offer us many new heroes to employ, and this is most welcome. Here is a chance, in the average game, for a player to individualise one's army. All the original heroes, however, are still present, with the exception of Gollum, whose role has changed somewhat. The Nazgul have been modified, now appearing mounted, on foot or astride the flying fellbeasts. The other heroes' abilities have not been changed, except some of their experience levels have been adjusted.

Furthermore, Galadriel and Sauron can now be played, in special circumstances, both in single- and multi-player modes.

Games tend to be very intense, in keeping with its predecessor. The battalion-based model has been retained, with the battalions consisting of larger numbers of troops now. Regular troops cannot level up beyond fifth level now, and never become as powerful as before, so it is far less likely that a player will end up with a "super-army" consisting of a few highly upgraded elite battalions. Units tend to suffer from a rather weak path-finding artificial intelligence, often becoming confused by the terrain. On the other hand, some ingenious tactical elements have been incorporated – for example, ranged units can acquire larger targets at somewhat longer ranges, which makes sense.

GIANT EAGLE'S-EYE VIEW

All in all, this is a very good game indeed, despite the shortcomings discussed elsewhere in this review. Battle for Middle-earth II manages to furnish us with a polished cinematic feel, without succumbing to the all-too-frequent pitfall of over-portraying the plot and sacrificing playability. Although taking half an evolutionary step backward in terms of game dynamics, it is solid and great fun to play. **NAG**



WAGING WAR

This new chapter once again presents several mode-of-play options. The single-player campaigns have reverted to a more traditional approach, which seems to have been a common theme in this game's development. Instead of the pseudo-free-form approach of its predecessor, this title's campaigns are linear and totally story-driven. The previous approach has not, however, been completely abandoned, and has been resurrected in a separate game mode, War of the Ring. In this mode, players are presented with a territory map of Middle-earth, and are tasked with conquering this land with the faction of their choice. Borrowing a page from many other strategy titles, this mode allows the player to play out individual engagements or have them auto-resolved. The former is recommended when fighting against the odds, the latter when one has an overwhelming initial advantage and wants to save time. This game format is not a first, but what is unusual is the fact that it can be played in multiplayer mode. Be warned: multiplayer War of the Ring games take very long indeed.

Of course, the game features traditional multiplayer modes, which are individual battles. This mode is fast-paced and action-packed, but suffers from a fairly major shortcoming, which is actually representative of the entire game – the factions have not been differentiated enough. So, although the side features six factions, three good and three evil, each trio seems to consist very much of carbon-copies of each other – the only major differences appear between good and evil. Therefore, rather than playing different sides, it feels almost like playing the same side with different "skins". On the other hand, statistic reporting for player profiles, and post-game debriefings, are exceptionally detailed.

CELLULOSE AND CELLULOID

Whereas the original Battle for Middle-earth was grounded firmly in the film franchise, this sequel of sorts draws its inspiration from more of Tolkien's world. The first title's greatest failing is most likely the fact that the game's story follows the movies' plot too closely, with the result that players generally know exactly what is coming next at any given point, at least in the case of the Good campaign. In fact, from a story-telling standpoint, the game's saving grace was the fact that there was an Evil campaign which, of necessity, diverged from the original plot fairly drastically.

This mistake has not been repeated in Battle for Middle-earth II. The developers have been wise to think up a separate plot-line that runs in parallel to the events in the popular story. Thus, the game's setting has not been rendered inconsistent, while not rehashing old news. This has been made possible by the fact that the license under which the game has been developed now extends to the books and other written sources from the Tolkien Estate. The net result of this is that players can now experience more characters, creatures and geographical locations than were featured in the films. Thus, dragons make an appearance – and those of you who doubt their existence in Middle-earth need only read The Hobbit to encounter Smaug, a (wait for it) red dragon! This is not the only example of such broadening of the setting – readers of the Lord of the Rings book trilogy have often asked, regarding the movies, "where is Tom Bombadil?" Well, he's back in Battle for Middle-earth II, albeit, alas and alack, without his lady...



SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW

It is ironic that, while gamers often complain about new games lacking originality or new concepts, when something innovative does happen along, it meets with criticism, largely on the grounds that it breaks with tradition, "Isn't what we're used to." This is the fate that befell the original Battle for Middle-earth: Electronic Arts developed a real-time strategy title with a truly innovative base-building and resource model, and the game failed in many gaming circles.

Let us briefly cast our gaze back upon those innovations. Buildings could be erected only on specific plots, either within a designated base location, or scattered throughout the battlefield. What this essentially meant was that building space was, fundamentally and in a subtle fashion, a resource. Players were required to make strategic decisions regarding how they would utilise their space, and the resource model reinforced this aspect. How so? Multiples of various buildings would provide cost reductions to various purchases, for example, multiple farms reduced the price of cavalry, while blacksmiths made unit upgrades cheaper. Thus, players were required to plan in advance what kind of game they would play, and build accordingly. Furthermore, experience was, effectively, also a resource, as buildings levelled up with use, thus unlocking other units and upgrades. However, the unit caps were quite stringent, so getting the right unit/upgrade combinations required some planning, including the deliberate sacrifice of superfluous units. All these elements added to the strategic depth of the game. Nevertheless, a significant portion of the audience denounced this mechanic, never truly giving it a real chance.

The unfortunate result of this situation has been that, understandably, Electronic Arts has heeded public opinion and abandoned an intriguing new concept. We cannot fault them for this – at the end of the day, a game needs to be popular in order to succeed, both commercially and as a viable competition medium. The result is Battle for Middle-earth II, which retreats into the territory of the traditional real-time strategy game, with free-form building and a more linear resource model. While the game itself is well-designed, and these traditional approaches are smoothly and enjoyably implemented, it is sad to see a brave new idea fail to take root for lack of fertile soil and, consequently, perish...



VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R359

Developer

Avalanche

Publisher

THQ

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

Genre

Platform

Age Restriction

All

Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1-2

Players: 1-2

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BOTTOM LINE

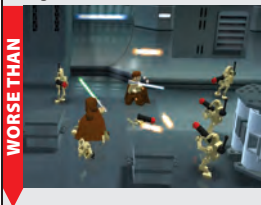
The time trials are annoying, but there's little else wrong with the latest Tak game.

85/100

Spongebob and Friends: Unite!



Lego Star Wars



Did cavemen ever think they would appear in games one day?

TAK: THE GREAT JUJU CHALLENGE

THERE ARE A LOT of platform titles on the market, creating arguably the biggest roster of celebrity characters in gaming. Tak debuted in this tough market and dug in as a title more orientated towards children, but the great animation and colourful world won the series its share of fans. Though while contemporaries like Jak & Daxter moved towards older audiences, the Tak series kept with its younger audience, evident from Nickelodeon's involvement.

Thus, with two successful games already out, Avalanche released the third in the series. But Tak: The Great Juju Challenge doesn't have a '3' associated with it. The title is a diversion off the course of the series, though it does follow up on the first two. Tak and Lok, the cerebrally challenged warrior (voiced by the excellent Patrick Warburton), take part in a race to win a prize from a magical fairy (or spirit; it doesn't really matter). This means finishing several platformer style levels with as much time to spare at the end – the team with the most time wins. Reaching checkpoints adds more time, and a well-calculated sprint through a level will quickly take your team to the top. There is more of a story to it, but it's not complicated – timed level runs are the main theme of the game.

This is complimented with the game's co-op nature. Both Tak and Lok are playable and a player can switch between them to achieve certain things.

Lok can throw Tak up to ledges, while Tak is good at crossing water. Using their respective strengths together is the key to solving obstacles and getting to the end with the highest score. Two players can also help each other in a split-screen mode, and the



game switches between single and multiplayer seamlessly.

All in all The Great Juju Challenge is a nice platform title with a colourful world, crisp graphics, interesting characters and a funny script. The watershed is whether you like running through timed levels, because that's the game's main pressure point. Since it's aimed towards children, the game is easier than you'd expect (though much, much better than any of Nickelodeon's license spin-offs), but trying to get the best time on a level can often be more frustrating than fun if that's not how you like to play a game. Some levels will require you to play them several times before cracking a good time, though mercifully if your time runs out you can still try and finish the level.

The Great Juju Challenge is a welcome arrival to the series and a highly polished platform title. If the time trial feature doesn't put you off, it's worth getting. **NAG**





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VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R399

Developer

Digital Illusions

Publisher

Electronic Arts

Supplier

EA Africa [011] 516-8300

Genre

FPS

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

Online: Yes

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Competent and often exciting first-person shooter, unfortunately let down by occasionally sloppy controls and a lack of any offline multiplayer mode. It's nowhere near as phenomenal as the Battlefield series on PC, but it's a respectable console debut for the franchise.

74/100

Smelling Napalm in the morning



America's Army: Rise of the Soldier



BATTLEFIELD 2: MODERN COMBAT

ELECTRONIC ARTS' MUCH LAUDED wartime first-person shooter franchise has, at last, made its debut on the console, in the guise of Battlefield 2: Modern Combat. Set in Kazakhstan in the not-too-distant future, Modern Combat's storyline centres on the political instability in that country, where US troops have been deployed to restore order. In response to this, China starts feeling a little jumpy because of its geographical proximity to all the chaos, and sends its own troops as a response. Throughout the game you'll switch between the American forces and the Chinese, and you'll also see news report cut-scenes originating on both sides of the conflict, perhaps included as a smart bit of political satire on the part of the developers.

With the transition to consoles, the game has taken a firm step in the single-player direction, and this is reflected in the variety of the single-player missions. In addition to simply hoofing it with a soldier, there are a number of vehicles available to control, including tanks and helicopters. Sadly though, the vehicular control, in particular, feels a little clunky, and although this might be an attempt to simply make the game more challenging, it is a little frustrating.

One of the most significant innovations in the play dynamic is the 'hot-swapping' feature. This allows you to swap between different allied units, simply by targeting them and pushing a button. This unique concept goes a long way towards eliminating much of the 'drag factor', usually present in titles of this genre. Instead of having to traverse miles and miles of terrain as you make your way to wherever the action is taking place, all you need to do now is set your sights on a friendly unit some distance away and you can instantly take control of that unit. This mechanic also comes in handy in allowing you to select the correct unit for any given task – if you need to pick off distant targets, simply switch to a sniper; should you wish to take out an enemy tank or helicopter, switch to a rocket-launcher toting engineer. Although it may seem like it makes matters a little too simple, the 'hot-swapping' mechanism, in fact, adds an additional strategic element to the play dynamic.

Unfortunately there are a few niggles present in the single-



player mode, including a kamikaze-style AI, as well as the annoying habit enemy units have of respawning at the most inconvenient times, and at the most inconvenient places. Nevertheless, the game manages to provide a solid and enjoyable experience, even if it does too little to truly stand out in its genre.

Visually Battlefield 2 certainly looks the part, even if it doesn't quite reach the levels of graphical excellence displayed by its PC brethren. The environments and characters all show adequate levels of detail, though visual effects, such as explosions, lack impetus. The sound also finds itself on the better side of average, with an appropriate score and fairly convincing effects.

All in all, Battlefield 2 manages to be a solid and entertaining, though unremarkable, starting point for the console branch of the franchise. The lack of any offline multiplayer mode puts a slight damper on the title's longevity, but the single-player campaign is entertaining, and certainly aided by the 'hot-swapping' innovation that keeps the action fresh. It doesn't reach the same heights as its PC namesakes, but is nonetheless worth a look at for FPS fans. **NAG**

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VITAL INFO

Platforms

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R299

Developer

Turbine

Publisher

Atari

Supplier

Megarom (011) 234-2680

Genre

MMORPG

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

CPU: Pentium 4 1.5GHz or AMD Athlon 1.5GHz

Video: 64MB Hardware T&L-compatible graphics card (DirectX 9.0c-compatible)

RAM: 512MB RAM

HDD: 3GB free HDD

CD/DVD: 6x DVD-ROM

Internet: Required

Players: 1

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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ONLINE: STORMREACH

"CLINICALLY FAITHFUL," IS HOW A NAG staff member described Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach (when this reviewer's experience with the game was described to him).

Stormreach, while by no means a terrible MMORPG, somehow managed to avoid the freedom and imagination that made the table-top Dungeons & Dragons so popular, yet the new MMORPG retained every single rule you can find in the Third Edition rulebooks.

Ironically, Stormreach has more in common with Guild Wars (PC) than it does with World of Warcraft (PC) – mission instances are connected via non-combat multi-user areas, hubs from which to find and accept missions. These missions are then played either solo or if you form a party, the party members will join the same instance as you (but first they have to walk to the relevant instance entry point).

In synopsis, Stormreach reads like a typical D&D campaign. The frontier city of Stormreach, a port in a storm, mixes the ambition and plots of its citizens into a sprawling gateway to the lands. Good in text, the presentation is a bit different. Stormreach comes across as a patchwork city, even when it isn't

supposed to. Turbine seems to have yet come to grips with its own level editors. The environments, while authentic according to the rulebooks, are lifeless and sterile. The same can be said for the monsters that inhabit the dungeons, along with the missions themselves. On the whole actually, Stormreach lacks fecundity.

Turbine basically spent so much time trying to create something utterly faithful to the system, they forgot about the fun freedom of expression brings to Dungeons & Dragons. There is freedom in the character creation. The expected amount of trimmings, hats, facial features and so forth all exist to create a unique character. That unique character, however, seems frivolous in the game world, unimportant to others and even yourself.

To gain access to D&D Online, one first has to jump through a few very unnecessary hoops (though at the time of writing, this system may have changed). As with most MMORPGs, there is a monthly subscription fee. The \$14.99 for Stormreach is fair with respect to the current model employed by most publishers. The game also includes a 30 day free trial so you can make up your mind about it first. To gain access to the free trial however,

BOTTOM LINE

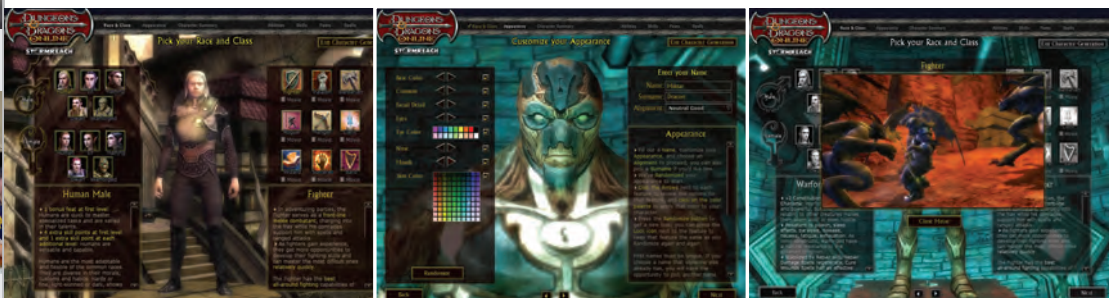
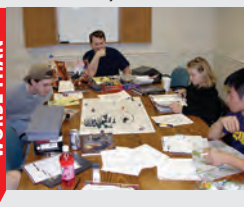
Stormreach is a game which should be judged on a per-player basis. Some gamers will hate it, while some will love it unequivocally. Others will build a little shrine to it, and continue to pay the \$14.99 monthly fee.

70/100

Calculating THACO



The Real Thing (with Mountain Dew)



you need a credit card. It doesn't stop there unfortunately. Codemasters won't accept a direct credit card signup. You first have to create a PayPal account. Once that PayPal account has been created and set up, then you can subscribe to Stormreach and get your 30 days free. Just be sure to cancel the account before 30 days if you don't wish to continue paying.

The avid Dungeons and Dragons fan will be surprised to find that the oddest element of the traditional D&D tabletop has made its way into Stormreach. A 'Dungeon Master' voice, voiced by a fair voice actor, brings something familiar into the game. As you enter certain areas, the Dungeon Master will tell you important (or sometimes plain unimportant) things. "You smell the salty air of the sea from far away" is a useful voiceover addition, giving the player a tactile feedback otherwise impossible. "There is a lever in front of you" however, when the lever is in plain sight in front of you with a big 'Lever' icon, seems thoughtless. One can appreciate the Dungeon Master element though, especially when he (and it remains a he) has to do the voice of a damsel – rather priceless if you're caught off guard.

The game has all the elements it needs: puzzles, traps, multiple skills, races and classes. The real-time combat makes for more involved battles, a stark contrast to the 'Connect 4' method World of Warcraft uses. None of the 'you hit, I hit, spell buff, spell de-buff' stuff, you're right there in the thick of the combat. Every dodge is manual, every swing (can be) manual. As you can imagine, this requires a rather beefy Internet connection.

Dungeons & Dragons Online: Stormreach is a faithful D&D game – just without the Dungeons (most of the dungeons seem prefab and look entirely familiar) and lacking Dragons (which will apparently be added with the first expansion pack). **NAG**



Visual puzzles are interesting but not imaginative



VITAL INFO

■ Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

■ Suggested Retail Price

R299

■ Developer

The Collective

■ Publisher

Atari

■ Supplier

Megarom [011] 234-2680

■ Genre

Action

■ Age Restriction

16+

■ Specifications

Internet: Not Required

Players: 1

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BOTTOM LINE

Not a great game, not a terrible game. Prince of Persia meets hip-hop, oddly without baggy pants. Getting Up is too niche to really appeal to the mainstream.

69/100

LA Rush (PS2)



Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time (PS2)



Punch, kick and spray your way to graffiti glory... defiance isn't easy!



MARC ECKO'S GETTING UP: CONTENTS UNDER PRESSURE

'GETTING UP' IS A message lost in translation to videogames. Marc Ecko actually stated it best when he said, "Getting Up is my game." He was 100% correct; it is his game in style, approach and meaning. Unfortunately, what's good for the goose isn't always good for the gander. Getting Up is his game, but it won't appeal to anyone else really.

Gamers have long since stopped looking at videogames as art. Sure, gamers love to fight for the viewpoint that games are art, but only to further their own means. They fight the art fight to gain recognition for games, because then it would mean games become more popular. Very few gamers actually understand what art is, or even how a game could be art.

If one were to look at Getting Up as a game, one would see only this: a basic control scheme, akin to Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time without the smoothness of control innovation. The drab environments don't inspire any lasting impressions. The graffiti system, 'colour in the square' with the analogue sticks (don't bother playing the PC version on keyboard), isn't exactly involved. Overall and approached as a game, Getting Up isn't a very good game. What it sets out to do as a game, it only does partially. The acrobatics to get to difficult places (which score you higher for tagging) just don't function as well as they could. Lead protagonist Trane ends up being a frustration to control, instead of an exercise in boundless acrobatic energy and freedom – once again taking a backseat to the Prince of Persia.

All the videogame review sites online have already said: "Getting Up is a terrible game."

But let's look at it from a different perspective, one where

Getting Up is less of a game, and more of a deep expression. Yes, one pays for the game because it is that – a game. Plainly put, if you buy Getting Up to get a game you're going to be, most likely, disappointed. Even if you buy it because it is a unique piece of art, you might find yourself wondering what you're going to do with such expensive un-fun art. So for now, relegate the game to 'Bargain Bin' status and once you can pick it up at a price you think is fair, then you can approach Getting Up the way it should be: as art.

"What if graffiti could change the world?" is the simple core question that forms the foundation of the story for Getting Up. The player, as Trane, rises from 'toy' to 'All City King', but not just for status. Getting Up loosely follows real world events, starting with the 1980s train culture scene where subways were prime targets for gaining fame, following through to the silver-train era (albeit exaggerated). "Take Back the City" became the battle cry for denizens of the urban sprawls rebelling against heavy anti-graffiti tactics from the government and law enforcement.

Much like graffiti, the question of Getting Up being art is one that could be debated forever. Stoic analysis, emotive association or even by breaking down the game into components won't really yield an answer either. Art is a personal relationship the viewer or participant creates with the work of art.

If you can 'get' what Getting Up is trying to say, and if you can nod your head and truly understand what battles were fought for the right to freedom of speech, then you can see what Marc Ecko was trying to do with his game. **NAG**





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VITAL INFO

Platforms

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R400

Developer

Indie Built

Publisher

2K Sports

Supplier

TBA

Genre

Snowboarding

Age Restriction

7+

Specifications

Online: Leader boards

Players: 1



AMPED 3

VIDEOGAMES HAVE THE UNIQUE ability to represent ideas and genres in multiple, very different ways. If you take the older Supreme Snowboarding (PC), what you had was a very technical representation of the sport, and only the sport. Later, SSX gave the sport a more stylised twist, adding the 'cool' factor with over-the-top tricks and trendy duds. Amped 3, if one had to place it into that picture somewhere of representing snowboarding, would be the game that represents snowboarding as an acid trip.

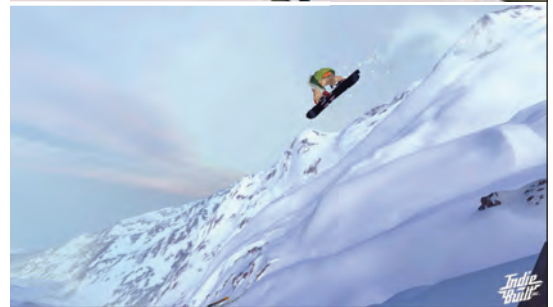
Starting the player off, pre-customisation, in a bunny suit, about to take a huge leap off a cliff, well, that should sum up the game quite nicely. But since you're all here for the rest of the page, we might as well continue.

An interesting aspect of Amped 3 is that while it certainly is a next-generation title, it isn't immediately noticeable as one. If anything, it sets an example of how you get games that look next-gen and games that act next-gen. Fight Night Round 3 on the 360 is an example of a game that looks next-gen, the underlying game mechanics are mostly unchanged from the previous PS2 incarnation. Amped 3 acts next-gen because while it doesn't have stunning visuals, it has a sense of scope and interaction that were impossible on previous consoles.

The mechanics, the control of the snowboarder and the systems that influence how you do tricks are solid. Snowboarding down the mountain is fun and painless; pulling off high-scoring tricks is easy. While not as over-the-top as the SSX series, Amped has always carved its own path through the power.

Amped 3 is a snowboarding game, yes, but its focus is more on the freeform nature of the mountain, the physics system and the mission structure. The mountains are based on real world resorts, and quite accurately so. This is the first key feature of a game that acts next-gen: the entire mountain you snowboard on is always there, in memory, with no streaming. Unlike SSX where the level loads in the background as you board down the mountain, in Amped 3 the entire mountain is always instantly accessible either by a quick warp or by swapping to a Snowmobile.

On this mountain, Havok-based physics constantly apply forces to the elements on the surface of the snow. This in turn ties in to the mountain editor, a mode where the player can purchase (with points earned from missions) ramps, houses, cats



and other things to put on the mountain. These, in turn, help the player complete missions. A well-placed ramp on the mountain, placed there by the player, can make the difference between completing a mission with 10,000 points, or 1,000,000 points.

If anything, the strongest reason to play Amped 3 is the sheer chutzpah the game has. Every cut-scene is unique and special (in many ways), serving to lure the player along to the next one. One almost develops a morbid fascination with wanting to see what crazy thing is going to happen next.

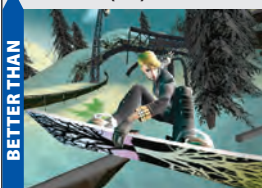
The problem with Amped 3 is that the game is entirely too true to itself. Thus, it won't appeal to the mainstream – it's just too damn crazy. On the fringes of gaming, Amped 3 will find a happy, seamless Live-enabled high score list 'home' with many of the more esoteric gamers. Its nature will alienate it from everyone else. Amped 3 is the type of game one must play in demo form first, before even considering a purchase. **NAG**

BOTTOM LINE

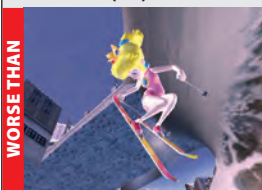
A feisty snowboarding game overflowing with cheesy dialogue, crazy cut-scenes and an actual plot, Amped 3 is very much an acquired taste. One has to prefer slightly less technical snowboarding combined with insane humour.

70/100

SSX: On Tour (PS2)



SSX: On Tour (PS2)



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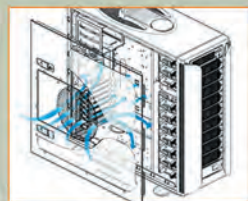
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- BTX Upgrade Kit (optional)
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VITAL INFO

Platforms

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

\$49

Developer

Inis

Publisher

Nintendo

Supplier

www.lik-sang.com

Genre

Rhythm

Age Restriction

3+

Specifications

Players: 1

Wireless: Yes

DS Download: Yes



79/100

OSU! TATAKAE! OUENDAN

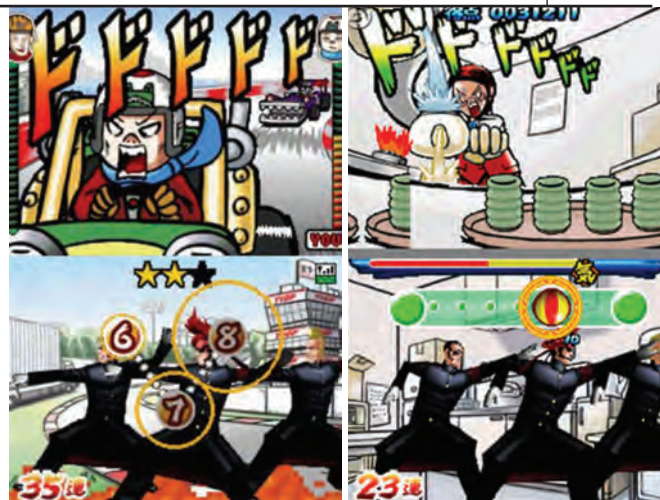
IMPORTING JAPANESE GAMES, ESPECIALLY titles unlikely to ever see English translation, can be risky. Thankfully, as was the case with Osu! Tatakae! Ouendan, sometimes it pays off and you get a game that is really unique, yet fun.

Actually meaning "Go! Fight! Cheer Squad," Ouendan as it is often informally referred to, is a rhythm game. The player controls a troupe of overzealous motivational cheerleaders, providing the rhythm by tapping or sliding on specific points of the screen.

Ouendan is split into levels; each level is a song with a story. The song tells of a character who is facing some or other dilemma – that is until they cry out "Ouendan!" when the problem gets too much. This then summons the cheer squad, and it gets stranger from there. The player needs to tap (in time to the music or melody) numbered circles on screen, in the order of their numbers. Prolonged beats are 'tracks', which the player needs to follow with the stylus point, but more specifically, keeping the point on a ball that rolls down the track.

The style and art direction of the game is stereotypically Japanese, but playful and entertaining. Each story is cute, and the little animations that play when you complete a section often priceless.

As far as portable rhythm games go, Ouendan is a warm gem, perfect for quick play and coming back to when you want to do something fun. **NAG**



Cheer, damn you! Cheer!



VITAL INFO

Platforms

| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

\$49

Developer

Nintendo

Publisher

Nintendo

Supplier

www.lik-sang.com

Genre

Rhythm

Age Restriction

3+

Specifications

Online: No

Players: 1 – Infinity

Wireless: Yes

DS Download: Yes

DAIGASSO! BAND BROTHERS

DAIGASSO! BAND BROTHERS, TENTATIVELY titled Jam with the Band, is a DJ style game where players play parts of a song, using a specific musical instrument found in that song. Instead of playing to the beat of the song however, you literally play the notes of the instrument.

The single-player segment of Band Brothers contains 35 songs among the unlockable songs, each divided into genre categories. The player, on beginner difficulty, only plays the game using the D-pad and a single button. The player has to press (or hold) the correct input, as the track scrolls along. Later, additional directions and buttons get added, making the game curve up nicely in difficulty.

Band Brothers also lets you create your own tracks, either manually (quite difficult without English translation) or by singing into the microphone. These can be played either single-player or multiplayer.

The multiplayer is quite surprising. Two to eight players can link up wireless to play off a single cartridge. Each player takes command of one specific instrument. Each player is literally a member of the band. Every note played, right or wrong, can be heard on all the players' systems.

Band Brothers isn't an import title easily accessible to everyone. The menus are a bit confusing without English, and the game might not be clear to someone who doesn't get the basics of rhythm games. Thankfully there are various resources online, including Wikipedia, where translations for the game can be found. Using these translations as a guide, players can enjoy one of the more solid portable rhythm games to come out of Japan. **NAG**

Even if you could read Japanese, you'd still get stuck on the more difficult songs



81/100



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R469

Developer

Konami

Publisher

Konami

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

Genre

Strategy-RPG

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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70/100

SUIKODEN TACTICS

SEVEN YEARS BEFORE and extending through and beyond the events of Suikoden IV, Suikoden Tactics is a strategy-RPG title that follows the story of Kyril, a young man who sets out on a quest to uncover the secrets of the mysterious Rune Cannons (which were responsible for his father's death). Although the storyline isn't overly complex, it manages to be fairly involving in its simplicity, and it does well to expand upon the story of Suikoden IV, filling in holes and tying up some of the loose ends. Fortunately, though, although having played Suikoden IV may increase your enjoyment of this title, it is in no way a prerequisite for Suikoden Tactics, which manages to be accessible even to newcomers.

The play dynamic is typical of any strategy-RPG title, with a variety of characters on offer, each with their own abilities. Unique additions include the ability to have pairs of characters build partnerships through dialogue during battles, which eventually allows them to learn very powerful team-based attacks. Also, the game employs an elemental system whereby various squares on the battle grid have an elemental affinity, which can affect the character occupying that square in either a detrimental or beneficial manner.

Its cartoon-like visual style lends Suikoden Tactics a feel of authenticity, though the character and environment designs could have shown a little more variety. The sound effects and music are for the most part quite respectable, though the voice-acting deteriorates to the ridiculous at times.

The main adventure is fairly short-lived and a little easy at



times, though a number of side quests are available to flesh out the title. Nonetheless, Suikoden Tactics makes for quite a fun romp, and is perfectly suited to newcomers to the strategy-RPG genre. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R469

Developer

Konami

Publisher

Konami

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

Genre

RPG

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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60/100



THE SWORD OF ETHERIA

THE SWORD OF ETHERIA follows the story of a young boy endowed with the ability to communicate with Etheria, a sort of magical energy. In short, this means that he may in fact be a 'Katena', a sort of superhuman. This attracts the attention of two of the top-ranking Katena, who quickly track him down and join forces with him in a quest to liberate the world from the control of its tyrannical gods. The story is, to say the least, quirky. To be blunt, in fact it's completely absurd in typical anime fashion, but as such, it lends itself to the game's abstract feel.

Although the game is mostly a typical hack-and-slash RPG affair, it provides some innovation in the form of your two Katena allies. During battle, you can knock airborne enemies towards your companions, who then take it upon themselves to inflict further damage on your foes before knocking them back to you, volleyball

style. The longer you manage to juggle enemies in this manner, the more damage you'll inflict on them, and the more special attacks you'll be able to unlock. It sounds rather convoluted, but in practice it's quite effective, although the experience would perhaps be more enjoyable had the game allowed you direct control over your team-mates.

Unfortunately, aside from this, the game dynamic seldom shows any signs of innovation and can become tedious, especially in combination with the rather linear level design. Nonetheless, it's a departure from typical RPG fare, and as such is, at least initially, refreshing. Stunning visuals do well to bolster the title's presentation, though they do little to lengthen its lifespan. In short, if quirky, off-the-wall interactive anime is your forte, this title may be right up your alley. For everyone else, it's just another RPG that becomes tiresome very quickly. **NAG**

Play volleyball with foes if you want a change in your RPG soup



VITAL INFO

Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|------------|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R399

Developer

Farsight Studios

Publisher

System 3 | Crave

Supplier

WWE (011) 462-0105

Genre

Pinball

Age Restriction

3+

Specifications

Memory: 128KB

Players: 2-4

Extras: Game Sharing

Wireless

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BOTTOM LINE

If you really love pinball and would like a little more than just a portable pinball simulator, then Gottlieb Pinball Classics is the game for you. You'll learn a little about the history of pinball and even get a chance to play on a few of those classic tables.

82/100

A walk down memory lane, players can try 'machines' from even the early 20th century

GOTTLIEB PINBALL CLASSICS

IT'S PINBALL ON THE PSP. Keep a metal ball in play using a set of flippers on a slightly inclined rectangular table and rack up as high a score as possible. Besides the obvious and not so obvious benefits of having pinball on the move, Gottlieb's Pinball Classics has a few other things going for it.

Pinball Classics is a technically solid game with crisp, clear graphics representing the tables and some average to excellent ball physics. With this type of game, physics is everything and how the game 'feels' will ultimately decide if it's a winner or not. Other than straightforward pinball, this title features a condensed history lesson on one of the greatest pinball manufacturers of all time, Gottlieb Pinball Company. You'll find a varied collection of pinball tables on offer; all with a short historic piece and original advertising flyer, should you be interested. It's all very arty and retrospective, so don't expect a full complement of brand new tables or cutting edge pinball technology.

In terms of the play dynamic, some of the tables are downright annoying to play, with more holes for your ball to slip through than a cheap Hollywood thriller plot, which will remind more than a few of you as to why you chose space invaders, for your corner café thrills, over the aging pinball machine at the back. Other tables are engaging and entertaining to play, with skill deciding how much fun you have and not random deflections. Some of the older tables are rather interesting, such as Play-Boy [1932] which features no flippers at all, but instead pins, poker card graphics and holes for the ball to fall into. Overall, Gottlieb Pinball Classics is an enjoyable game if you like pinball and is as frustrating and rewarding as the real thing. **NAG**

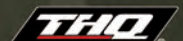


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VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on PS2

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R469

Developer

Konami

Publisher

Konami

Supplier

Ster Kinekor Games [011] 445-7900

Genre

Action

Age Restriction

12+

Specifications

Online: No

Controllers: 1

Players: 1

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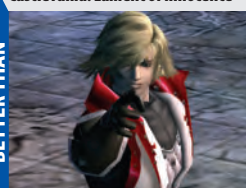
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BOTTOM LINE

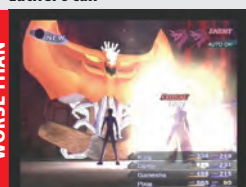
Curse of Darkness uses a clever combination of action-adventure and RPG elements, as well as above-average visuals and fantastic sound to make what is, thus far, the best current-generation iteration of the Castlevania series. Action-junkies may find the game tedious and repetitive, but RPG fans should find a fair amount of enjoyment here.

70/100

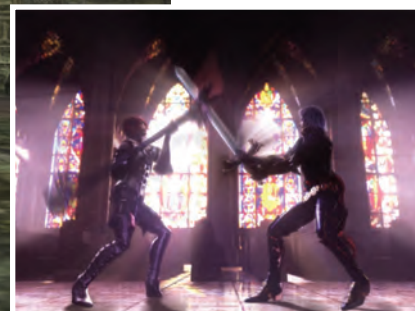
Castlevania: Lament of Innocence



Shin Megami Tensei:
Lucifer's Call



Armoured dodgeball is never easy



CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS

CASTLEVANIA: CURSE OF DARKNESS, set a few years after Dracula's death, sees you controlling Hector, a former devil forgemaster who abandoned his service in the forces of darkness, and with it also surrendered his demon-spawning abilities. However, Isaac, the man who killed Hector's wife and himself a devil forgemaster, soon appears on the scene, and Hector sets out to take his revenge, reclaiming his lost powers in the process. This is the basic premise of what is a complex and sometimes very convoluted, but ultimately effective story, and also provides the foundation for many of the unique elements of Curse of Darkness' play dynamic.

The basic game revolves around making your way through a number of maps, both dungeon- and outdoor-based, killing a variety of monsters on the way, as well as taking on a number of bosses. To this end, the game offers a very sound combat system that does well to keep the battles quite fast and interesting. Of course, this isn't the most interesting of play dynamics, and as such has the potential to become quite tedious, but fortunately there are a few innovations thrown in to keep things interesting.

Being a devil forgemaster, Hector has the ability to create 'Innocent Devils', which can most accurately be described as 'familiars', each with their own unique abilities. For example, there's a bird-type Innocent Devil that Hector can use to help him reach distant ledges, or to aid him in battle against airborne foes. Mage-type familiars can cast a variety of spells, while earth elementals may be able to open heavily reinforced doors. Only one Innocent Devil can be summoned at a time, though whichever one is summoned will gain experience from battles and eventually be able to level up and evolve.

To further add some variety to this idea, defeated enemies will sometimes drop items, amongst them evolution crystals

(of which there are several different types), each of which guides your familiar's evolution in a different direction. If that isn't enough, on occasion your Innocent Devils will release 'Devil Shards', allowing you to create infantile versions of the progenitor creature, and guide their evolution in a different pattern.

In addition to the evolution crystals, your enemies will sometimes drop rarer items, which Hector can combine to create weapons, armour, and other items, or to upgrade his existing arsenal, further adding some diversity to the title's play dynamic. Nonetheless, it goes without saying that if these RPG elements don't pique your interest, the hack-and-slash action soon becomes repetitive.

Graphically, Curse of Darkness shows well-detailed environments, even if they are somewhat lacking in diversity. The characters are well-designed and animated, and the cut-scenes, in particular, are beautiful. The presentation is further complemented by a sterling soundtrack and surprisingly impressive voice-acting, fitting in perfectly with the Castlevania series' atmosphere.

Ultimately, Castlevania: Curse of Darkness does well to cleverly integrate hack-and-slash style action with unique RPG elements and an intriguing storyline, in a manner that will certainly appeal to fans of the series. Unfortunately, though, once you strip away the role-playing components, the action quickly becomes tedious and repetitive, and the title may lose some of its appeal to action-junkies who have little interest in seeking out some of the rarer items on offer. Nonetheless, the title represents a dramatic step forward for the 3D Castlevania titles, and should do well to satisfy the appetites of the franchise's devotees. **NAG**





VITAL INFO

Platforms

Reviewed on Xbox

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R299

Developer

Secret Level

Publisher

Ubisoft

Supplier

Megarom (011) 234-2680

Genre

Tactical FPS

Age Restriction

16+

Specifications

Online: Yes

Players: 1

BOTTOM LINE

A 'true to life' army experience that doesn't seem very true to life, Rise of a Soldier seems more like a quick cash-in on the popularity of the US military's promotional tool — America's Army.

70/100

AMERICA'S ARMY: RISE OF A SOLDIER

WHAT WAS ONCE JUST a method to get more kids interested in the army (as well as a convenient data-mining operation), now sees its first real commercial offshoot.

Secret Level collaborated with the US Army to try and make Rise of a Soldier as true an Army experience as possible, without the drill sergeant shouting at you so hard you soil yourself, and then later go on a killing spree.

Going for it, Rise of a Soldier has a non-linear campaign and an online Live career mode. Online, you tweak physical and mental attributes that tie in with your aim, stamina and other abilities. Offline, the dated graphics and extremely buggy AI don't do much to convince anyone.

The game mechanics are competent, guns shoot, bad guys die and progression gives you more missions to attempt. Following a specific mission plan nets you different qualifications — Marksman, etc. The ultimate goal is to reach Special Forces (which should elicit a snigger from some).

Perhaps the problem lies in the fact that Real Special Forces operatives were consulted during the development of the game. What's the bet most of those real Special Forces have never touched a videogame before in their lives? There is a translation problem here, from reality to game, that Secret Level just doesn't seem competent enough to address yet.

At the end of the day, Rise of a Soldier comes across more as a recruitment pamphlet handed out by a six-foot tall uniformed man who wants to know your name and physical address. **NAG**



Shooting snow is very tactical



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VITAL INFO

Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Gameloft

Publisher

Gameloft

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

Pinball

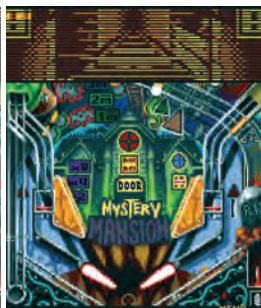
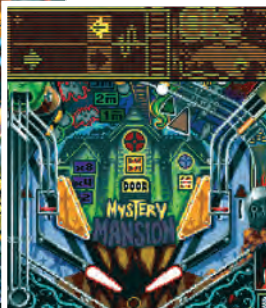
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MYSTERY MANSION PINBALL

PINBALL MACHINES MIGHT HAVE fallen out of favour with generations that experienced the digital revolution. But the format has had a spiritual lease on life with games based on the concept. In fact, as long as there have been digital games there have been pinball titles. As such, Mystery Mansion Pinball is not anything new. But if you play it for a while, you'll unearth a wealth of mini-games and classic pinball nostalgia, all at the same time. The top of the phone's screen mimics an old LED screen that gives you messages about what's happening on the board. The point is to reach the various objectives on the board, just as on a real pinball machine, by sending the ball to specific places at specific times. Unfortunately the controls aren't so slick and it takes some time to get used to the sluggish response time. The ball physics aren't that great either. Though it goes where it is supposed to, its motion is 'floaty', probably to compensate for the slow controls. So in unison they work together, but it does dilute the experience somewhat. **NAG**

Good pinball fun marred by slow controls **73/100**

AND 1 STREETBALL

STREET BALL BASKETBALL IS a popular theme in games at the moment, as publishers look for ways to expand their sports franchises beyond the stadiums and high-money teams. There is also a certain rawness that comes with unofficial games played in a backyard, which appeals to fans of the various sports (basketball, football, soccer). So a mobile iteration isn't unexpected. So does it work? Well, if you scan the other sports game being reviewed, it's clear that Gameloft has cracked the art of making working and enticing sports games for phones. And 1 Streetball is no different, except that the game demands a little more mastery before you can show your virtual opponents what's what on the court. Graphically it's nicely done and well animated, with fluid motions and catchy sound, complete with an announcer calling out special moves and events. But it definitely needs a high-end phone for its 3D graphics. There are both quick action and story modes, plus a tutorial to get the keys down pat. If you can manage the controls, which are (as usual) tricky in a fast-paced sports game, then And 1 Streetball is a lot of fun. **NAG**

A solid arcade basketball title **80/100**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Gameloft

Publisher

Gameloft

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

Sport

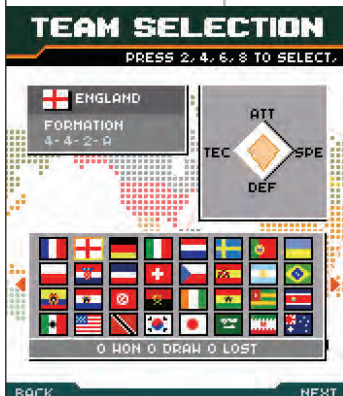
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2006 REAL FOOTBALL

LET'S PLAY FOOTBALL! FANS of the beautiful game are in for a treat with 2006 Real Football. The whole title screams solid quality from the moment you enter the menu. The game will try and send you to the tutorial first, which is recommended, to get to grips with some basic game concepts. After that, it's game on as you take on various international teams in quick and career matches. Graphically the title looks very good. The movement and antics of the players on field look retro, but are smooth and modern as well. The sound compliments this nicely, and care has been taken to flesh the arena out with more than just players on a green field. The controls are easy to master though a bit tight for the action at hand. Real Football is highly playable, but it also requires some quick movement and a keypad isn't perfect for that. This depends, though, on your make of phone. Everything else is spot-on and impressive, so sports fans will definitely find it worth wasting their time on. **NAG**

Apart from the limiting controls it's excellent **84/100**

AGE OF EMPIRES II

AN RTS GAME ON a mobile phone? Not a turn-based interpretation of a popular RTS series, but an actual real-time strategy game in your pocket. That's what Age of Empires II sets out to be, and it succeeds with flying colours. As usual, it's important to note that the game isn't ideal on a small screen and with a keypad for control, but the developer did a good job compacting everything into a basic interface that is easy to use. Obviously the lack of a mouse means that your reaction speeds are not nearly the same as on the PC version, but the game is forgiving enough with its difficulty to make sure players don't get frustrated. A short tutorial gives the basics on how to create your settlement and army, and then it's off to war. There is a full campaign with a story unique to this version, though it still comes down to crushing the other empires. A random map mode gives more variation and gives a quick RTS fix, though it's not exactly a quick fix considering how long a map can take to finish. Still, the game is ambitious and it pulls it off, making us look forward to more RTS-style games on our phones. **NAG**

Finally a working and fun RTS for cellphones **90/100**

VITAL INFO

Platforms

| | | | |
|------|-----|-----|-----|
| PC | PS2 | PS3 | PSP |
| XBOX | 360 | DS | MOB |

Suggested Retail Price

R50

Developer

Cybiko

Publisher

In-Fusio

Supplier

Thumbtribe

Genre

RTS

Download Code

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GET READY TO PLAY

BUDGET GAMES

THE SETTLERS: HERITAGE OF KINGS

DEVELOPER: Blue Byte
PUBLISHER: Ubisoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234-2680
GENRE: RTS
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R99

IT'S ALWAYS MOST GRATIFYING when a solid game gets remarketed as a budget title. Heritage of Kings boasts an attractive 3D graphics engine and a play dynamic that appeals to management real-time strategy enthusiasts who like a slower game with numerous details. Players are required to build an intricate simulation of a medieval town, complete with a fairly complex economy and a military branch. This army must be employed to defeat the opposing player or players. Players have at their disposal hero characters to lead their armies, with each hero possessing a set of unique abilities. The campaigns are story-driven affairs, and single-player games are engrossing. Heritage of Kings also allows one to play against live opponents over a local network or over the Internet. Although the economy and infrastructure of an established town are quite intricate, the game is not overly complicated to play. However, it does take a little while to



Take charge of your kingdom in this under-rated title



learn the fundamentals, which adds to the title's longevity. The graphics are very pleasing, with highly detailed, smoothly animated models on a rich terrain backdrop. Another unusual, distinguishing feature, given that this is a budget title, is the fact that there are two expansion packs available, greatly extending its re-playability value. The first of these adds new units, enhances some miscellaneous aspects of the game and introduces some new story elements, while the second greatly extends overall playing time by adding extensive new storylines **NAG**

CALL OF DUTY: FINEST HOUR

DEVELOPER: Spark Unlimited
PUBLISHER: Activision
DISTRIBUTOR: SK Games [011] 445-7960
GENRE: War FPS
PLATFORM: PS2
RETAIL PRICE: R249

UNFORTUNATELY THIS WASN'T THE Call of Duty series' finest hour, but that doesn't mean the World War II shooter wasn't good. The console portion of this series has been sitting in the shadow of the PC release for a while, something CoD 2 on the 360 only remedied later. As such, Finest Hour is likely to be a gem if you haven't tried it yet. In CoD tradition, the game doesn't spend too much time on characters and such. Players take the role of three different soldiers fighting in the American, British and Russian forces respectively. Based on the Eastern Front, Western Front and North Africa, the soldiers will take on lots of German troopers as they try to finish objectives given throughout the level. Games like Brothers in Arms went for a more emotive look at the war with deeper character stories. Call of Duty doesn't delve that deep and focuses far more on the action. But this intensity is also at home with the familiar themes of modern World War II stories like Band of Brothers. Finest Hours, though, was marred with some control issues and the AI has its weak moments. But its Platinum status shows that the game certainly didn't bomb with fans. If you're a fan of action shooters, especially with a World War II theme, this is worth getting. **NAG**



Action fuses with history as the Call of Duty machine moves on





We tried to build our own Babylon Zoo, but we failed

ZOO TYCOON

DEVELOPER: Blue Fang
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234-2680
GENRE: Management Sim
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R99

IT DOES BEG THE question why you would want to buy Zoo Tycoon on budget when there are also bundles with the expansions available. But unlike the sequel, Zoo Tycoon is much more machine-friendly, thanks to its isometric sprite engine, plus it remains a fun game to play. You must, of course, want to run a zoo. Blue Fang's simulator gives players the chance of creating a Zoo that people would want to visit. But it's not a matter of keeping the people happy, except with good design and facilities for them to use. The real draw card is to see the animals, so the game places most of the focus there. Each animal's happiness is determined by its cage. The



size, elements in the enclosure and other animals affect your creatures' moods. So most time is spent fine-tuning creature displays so that they are happy; in turn that brings patrons. Some people didn't like this aspect of the game, but it proved popular enough to warrant two expansions and a sequel. Unfortunately the expansions aren't included and they would have complimented the game nicely, but they can be purchased later if the game takes your fancy. As a twist to tycoon games, Zoo Tycoon is fun and has a lot of new ideas; enough to carve a niche for it in the management market. **NAG**

FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2002

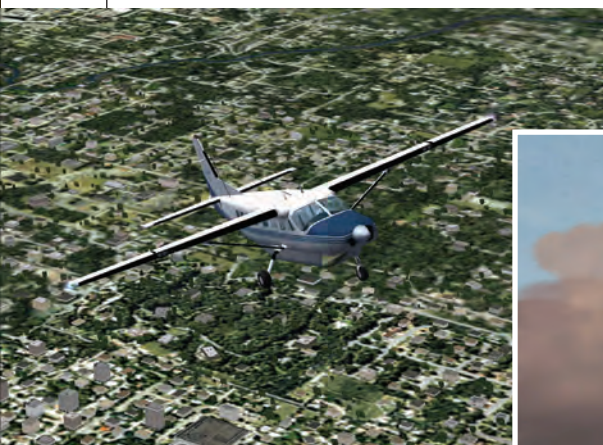
DEVELOPER: Microsoft
PUBLISHER: Microsoft
DISTRIBUTOR: MegaRom [011] 234-2680
GENRE: Simulation
PLATFORM: PC
RRP: R99

FLIGHT SIMULATOR 2002 MARKS a milestone for a series, as it's critically seen as the best in the series. The first major improvement is its performance. 2002 will run on a system that powered FS 2000, but much smoother and with more detail. The game has the most detailed and functional instrument panels in the series, plus

several major tweaks such as water physics (for easier water landings) and controller response have made the game much more playable. Keeping with tradition, professional flight instructors give newbies lessons on how to get a plane off the ground, plus everything else you need to know to eventually land it safely without your passengers reaching for the parachutes.

Features such as tower chatter and air traffic also add more realism to the series. It's not the hands-down best, but 2002 is at the top, and as a budget purchase is a no-brainer. **NAG**

Take to the skies in the most polished flight sim yet from Microsoft



BUDGET TOP 20



1. CSI: Crime Scene Investigation



2. Age of Empires Gold Edition



3. Playboy The Mansion Gold Edition



4. Silent Hunter III



5. Brothers in Arms



6. The Bard's Tale



7. The Settlers: Heritage of Kings



8. CSI: Miami



9. CSI: Dark Motives



10. Rainbow Six 3: Raven Shield Gold Edition



11. Microsoft Flight Simulator 2002



12. Zoo Tycoon



13. Scrabble 2005 Edition



14. Pacific Fighters



15. Combat Flight Simulator 2



16. Microsoft Train Simulator



17. Heroes of Might and Magic IV Complete



18. Motocross Madness 2



19. Chessmaster 10th Edition



20. Lock On Air Combat Simulator

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UBISOFT

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mouse pads



Feature: Digital animation



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January 2006



February 2006



March 2006



April 2006



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TECHNOLOGY FEATURE

102 PhysX Coprocessors

We're on the cusp of a new era in gaming, and the catalyst has been a relatively small company called Ageia. Get to know the PPU (Physics Processing Unit) acronym now, because it won't be long until you'll be driven to a supplier in search of one.

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RAM modules are one of the most critical parts of a high-performance PC. In this Hardcore3 Roundup, we look at a wide variety of RAM modules, from budget, entry-level parts to some of the fastest DIMMs you can get today.

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Going beyond the PSP, the GP2X combines some hardcore hardware with an OSS-based software platform to deliver mobile entertainment in a wide variety of formats. Absolutely perfect for the lazy gamer who sometimes needs to move about, but can't handle losing out on valuable playing time while he or she does!

OH, HOW THE MIGHTY HAVE FALLEN...

RIP – NAG HARDWARE EDITOR RUSSELL BENNETT MOURNS THE SPEEDY PASSING OF SOME TRULY POTENT KIT...

WE THINK THAT AFTER the last few months it has to be official now. The IT hardware game can be a funny thing. Sure, we've always known that one of the most comical things about our game, or at least the hardware behind the games we love to play, is how rapidly the hottest stuff of today becomes worthless tin and circuitry only days later.

We're specifically talking about graphics cards here, as they are the most in-your-face example of this model we've seen for a while now. Both major graphics cards vendors have recently pulled the here one minute, gone the next trick, although thankfully NVIDIA's technology cycle was a touch longer than ATI's, not counting the release of the 7800 512MB.

Admittedly, the remote nature of our market perhaps exacerbates the problem, but buyers of the X1800XT would

and this month the 7800 GT TOP (both factory-overclocked models which turned the 'older' chipsets into real little monsters), the replacements for the core chipsets were both imminent. Immediately, both disappeared from retailers' price lists when newer silicon arrived.

Sure, the vendors don't want to sell old technology, but we all know that most frequently last-generation flagship products perform better than the newer 'mid-range' models. In fact, these models often find themselves as the basis for the mid-range parts, stripped of some key features or clocked down. Why not simply sell these beasts off at a dramatically reduced price, so that astute buyers could pick up what was last week the best graphics card in existence, at an extremely palatable price?

No, rather the offerings are pulled from the shelves, to

SURE, THE VENDORS DON'T WANT TO SELL OLD TECHNOLOGY, BUT WE ALL KNOW THAT MOST FREQUENTLY LAST-GENERATION FLAGSHIP PRODUCTS PERFORM BETTER THAN THE NEWER 'MID-RANGE' MODELS.

justifiably have been slightly upset when the X1900 stormed in and delivered a whole chunk of extra oomph, at exactly the same price point. The same has just happened to the 7800 GTX 512.

As the 7800 GTX has been around for quite a while now, it is fair enough of course. Technology moves on and gets better, faster and prettier. What is interesting about both cases however, is how rapidly the older models disappear from the market.

Since the 7900 GTX should, technically, actually be coming in cheaper than the 7800 parts, which were being sold until last week, due to the different manufacturing techniques resulting in increased wafer yield and the like, why not continue to sell the now-dethroned flagship model at a dramatically deflated price point in relation to its performance against the newer model?

And 'rarer' enthusiast-orientated models are the first to disappear, of course. When we tested the X1800XT TOP

what fate remains something of a mystery to us.

Now we know that today's enterprise planning solutions have the art of JIT (Just In Time) production down even in mammoth corporations, but surely a fair stock of these prematurely culled offerings must exist. The good old 'Fire Sale' might not always work with technological goods, but this is precisely the ethos we're envisioning here. Unless, of course, these parts are recycled and re-skinned, to eventually be resold as 'new' mid-tier offerings?

Enough of the confusion however. What you have before you is a feast of hardware news, revelations and quite simply interesting pieces of information to help you piece together your perfect gaming PC – although sometimes not at the most affordable prices we must confess. Everyone loves the latest and greatest don't they? Which is also sound buying advice in our area, as this kit will date the slowest as well as give you the best gaming experience in the titles you'll want to play.

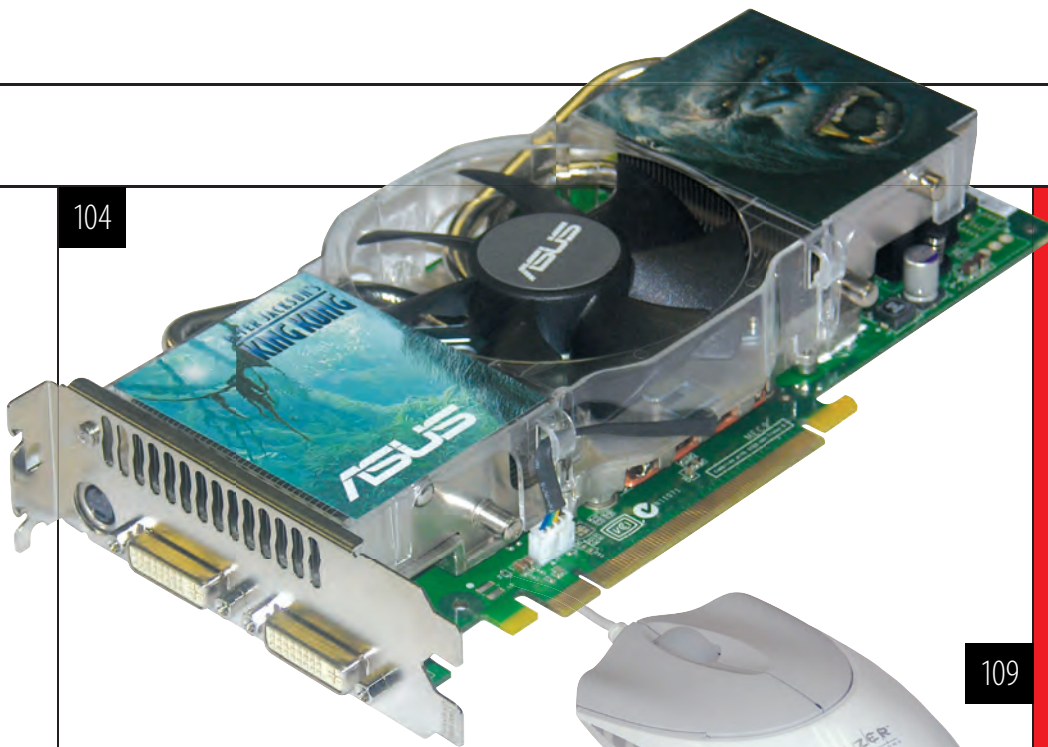
Russell Bennett

AWARDS

THE NAG HARDWARE AWARD is reserved for those products that really blow us away, whether by virtue of sheer grunt, value for money, or pure unspecified sexiness. This award will only be bestowed upon products that really stand out, even to our somewhat jaded and cynical eyes, and should be considered among the primary choices when purchasing products in the respective categories. Products which receive this accolade are beyond doubt rather special. So watch out for them and take note!



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OUR HARDWARE APPROACH

AT NAG, WE HAVE a very malleable approach to testing the latest hardware for you, and define the test procedures on a more or less product by product basis. Due to the wide range of hardware we review, a single policy cannot be laid out and strictly adhered to.

In addition, the number of products that comes over our desks on a monthly basis is so vast that it's a prime selection that even reaches these printed pages you read. We also try to include the hardware which gaming enthusiasts, a term synonymous with the more oft-maligned 'gamer' moniker, would like to find out more about.

Therefore, at NAG our review process, although rooted in a technical background and based on solid benchmark data, is largely objective and as such is our considered opinion, of the samples we receive. And we've been exposed to so much technology in our collective years in this vocation that these opinions are, we like to believe, among the most educated in the country, thanks to this vast amount of experience.

So we run all the requisite benchmarks, like FutureMark's synthetic 3DMark series, the latest system-heavy gaming titles [F.E.A.R. and X3 : Reunion are two that spring to mind right off the bat], and more specialised benchmarking suites like EVEREST [specifically for RAM performance] and SiSoft Sandra 2005, which is very good at measuring CPU performance.

What's most important to us is that we get a detailed impression of the reality of using the equipment being reviewed here. While that impression naturally includes 'The Numbers' from the various benches, these do not always reflect the absolute, final verdict. It's possible that we, from time-to-time, prefer a package which may not score the highest during testing, and where that is the reality, we'll explain our rationale. Although it isn't always entirely rational as we're emotional beings who can be swayed by feel-good factors [killer software bundles in high-end graphics cards boxes, for instance].

After all, our goal is to provide you, the reader, with the most accurate information about how satisfied you will be with your purchase. So enjoy reading about the latest and greatest hardware in the pages to follow, which we have slaved over so that you can make the most educated choice possible in your next hardware purchase.

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THE PHYSICS



EVERYONE SCOFFED AT MATHS coprocessors when they were first spoken about, and now every CPU built simply has one integrated into it. For heaven's sake, no-one was keen on this mouse idea as an input device when Microsoft first launched Windows 3.11... have you seen a PC without a mouse in the last 8 years? That's what we thought...

What are we talking about? Well, Ageia PhysX processors in fact. Or any physics coprocessor for that matter, which are suddenly all the rage since the aforementioned company announced that at last it's products would shortly become available in the general market.

OK we have heard this before. However what's different is that this time, the company has major hardware manufacturers and vendors actually producing retail-bound cards! Ageia PhysX cards can already be ordered on Dell gaming

workstations, as well as custom systems from both Alienware and Falcon Northwest. What's more enthusiast-dedicated Asustek has revealed that it will be one of only two manufacturers (BFGTech being the second) to be producing PhysX cards.

What's very interesting is how closely all the involved parties are clinging to this technology and details of its architecture. This is fair enough – there's so much interest focussed on the Physics Processing Unit (PPU) that any leaked information could well be picked up on by hungry competitors waiting in the shadows.

The idea behind the PPU though is a widely accepted model. Parallel processors exist in a wide variety of devices, from the obvious GPU to encryption offload processors on NICs. Ageia are simply applying it to an innovative new field, but make no mistake it is an area which will change the way we interact with our games.

Incorporating physics into games is all about driving much higher levels of realism from what we have seen before. The successful Havok physics engine which crops up in a host of modern titles is a CPU-dependant software iteration of what Ageia will be pushing, and we certainly remember the first time we saw Havok really working at its full potential (Max Payne 2) and marvelled at the realism of the title. Modern engines do far more physics calculations than that.

With a PhysX card installed in your system, the possibilities of total immersion in gaming titles are dramatically elevated. Bet on Soldier will be making use of the capabilities of this card to add accurately modelled fluid dynamics for its flamethrower weapon, causing the fiery spray to deflect and pool as real liquid would. Meanwhile what the developers of Cellfactor 2 are doing with PhysX in this title will blow your mind.

PROCESSOR



redefining modern gaming

In addition to neat little effects, the Ageia card it's said will be able to generate physical properties on numbers of objects way beyond what we have ever seen. So for instance, the F.E.A.R. benchmark run at one point charges the camera through a stack of cardboard boxes which are knocked out of the way in a realistic fashion. There can't be more than seven of them and older CPUs will invariably pause for a moment at this point. PhysX ought to be able to do literally a warehouse full of these boxes without a single extra CPU cycle needed...

The founders of Ageia have a history in building the high-speed interconnection fabrics in enterprise-level networking devices, which ordinarily utilise a backplane capable of transferring data internally at tens of Gigabits per second and beyond. In fact the transfer rates of these switching fabrics often boggle the mind these days, with 10 Gigabit backbone devices

each with multiple ports keeping up with wire speed data transmissions.

Feeding these high-speed pipes with data will be the task of the GDDR3 RAM, borrowed from the graphics card industry for this application. At first Ageia was keen to explore next-gen integrated RAM (XDR), but to keep the product cost-effective settled on the high-speed and widely available GDDR standard instead.

The PPU itself remains a mystery. As Ageia does not have it's own fabs, the chips are being produced by TSMC, and weigh in at just over 125 million transistors each. These will then be shipped to the two manufacturing partners, although Ageia is also approaching OEMs (like Dell, who have already taken it up) about integrating the processor on other products. Perhaps high-end enthusiast motherboards featuring integrated PhysX solution?

Ageia's initial design supports both 4 X PCI-E

and PCI interfaces, with the company implying that the scalability of the newer interface will make it more appealing over time. At last, something really useful that can populate those empty PCI-E slots of most modern motherboards...

But the outlook is not all rosy for Ageia. After all they are a small, startup company, and the interest they have driven in the marketplace in gaming physics has not been lost on much larger, more established organisations. In particular, the two graphics behemoths Nvidia and ATI...

There's no doubt that the PPU is "The Next Big Thing". The question is however, who will emerge as the leader in this field? Will it be the graphics giants, the small dedicated team at Ageia, or some other party entirely still holding their hands close to their chests? Either way, by next year realistic physics will be a gaming reality, and we cannot wait to get to playing them! **NAG**

HARDWARE

ASUS EN7900 GTX



NVIDIA HAS FIRED ITS next salvo of big guns in the mega-GPU war in answer to ATI's rapid-fire replacement of the X1800 XT with the current leader, the X1900XTX. And as we are rapidly becoming accustomed to, Asus was the first manufacturer in SA to have a review sample of the new card, the 7900 GTX.

Well, let's get straight to the review, as we're sure you are all chomping at the bit to find out just what the 7900 GTX can do to sweep the grin from the Canadian manufacturer's face.

Upon removing the EN7900 GTX from its box, you'd be forgiven for wondering in puzzlement just what has been changed. The dual-slot cooler featuring a large, centrally mounted fan with four heatpipes running through the heatsink looks exactly the same as those found on 512MB versions of the 7800 GTX. This is not necessarily a bad thing, as this design performed well for the hyper-clocked 512MB 7800, keeping all of its electrical components working at 100% (even at the 1.7GHz clock which that half a gigabyte of video RAM operated at).

Before proceeding to the technical bits, let us take a moment to discuss the bundle. After all, this is a high-end and very expensive unit, where we expect to be a little spoiled by the bonuses in the package.

Asus is very fond of bundling the full version of Peter Jackson's King Kong with its high-end cards. So proud in fact, that the image on the game box is replicated and pasted on the HSF itself. However, in this case, that's just about where the highlights of the bundle end. No external PSU, no Asus Excite Gamepad, not even the snazzy leather CD cover.

Right, petulant disappointment at not getting enough extra freebies aside, let's plug this baby into its new PEG slot to see what it's hiding beneath that large, King Kong-decorated bushel.

Despite the looks, the GPU on the 7900 GTX most definitely has been changed. In fact, it's an all-new part, codenamed G71 (successor to the G70 of the 7800 fame), and although sporting very similar specifications, it is manufactured using an all-new TSMC 90nm process, rather than the 110nm of the G70.

In addition to the higher wafer yields achieved by moving to

90nm, the G71 should also be able to operate at higher frequencies due to faster-switching transistors, and will have freed NVIDIA to add a higher transistor count to the GPU for additional features it feels may be needed. However, in an unprecedented move, the G70 actually has more transistors than

the G71 (302 million compared to 278 million on the newer part). NVIDIA has also reworked the chip's internal pipelines to be shorter and more efficient in the process, also contributing to the lower transistor count.

As a direct result of the new process, the physical die size of the G71 is substantially smaller, both compared to its predecessors and its major competition. Although ATI's R580, which powers the phenomenal Radeon X1900 range, is already using a 90nm process, its dimensions and thermal output characteristics are broadly similar to the G70. In fact, this core runs hotter than most 7800 implementations that we know of, which ought to give the G71 a significant advantage in terms of power consumption and heat generation. Asus recommends a 350W PSU for this card, which seems to make it possible to build an SLI system with two 7900s without requiring much more than a 500W PSU.

The GPU giant has kept the number of pixel and vertex pipelines exactly the same as before, eschewing the ATI approach of driving more efficient use of the 16 ROPs by throwing more pixel pipes into the architecture. The 24/16 configuration of the 7800 was deemed perfect for the newer part as well, so NVIDIA stuck to these numbers.

Predictably, the core clock frequency has been ramped up to 650MHz (a full 100MHz up on the 7800 512) to take advantage of the new silicone's capabilities, but interestingly, the RAM frequency is actually pegged back from the 7800 GTX 512's mammoth 1.7GHz effective, to 1.6GHz.

The proof of the pudding, as they say, is in the testing. To free the GPU up as much as possible, to impress the socks off us, we installed it in our Pentium 955XE-based system running on a Gigabyte 955X Royal motherboard, with 1GB of 1,000MHz Corsair RAM feeding the system data. This dual core Extreme Edition CPU clocks each of its cores at 3.43GHz, and represents the pinnacle of

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Lower power consumption
- Less heat
- Very little noise
- Mammoth graphics performance

■ Cons

Substandard bundle, for an Asus high-end card

■ Supplier

Axiz/Frontosa

■ Internet

www.asus.com.tw

■ RRP

R4,999

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Graphics Engine

GeForce™ 7900 GTX [G71 GPU]

■ Video Memory

512MB GDDR3

■ Engine Clock

800MHz [16GHz effective]

■ Memory Clock

1.6GHz [DDR3]

■ RAMDAC

400MHz

■ Bus Standard

PCI-E

■ Memory Interface

256-bit

■ Maximum Resolution

2,048 x 1,536 (For CRT)

■ VGA Output

With DVI to VGA adapters

■ TV Output

S-Video and Composite with HDTV

■ DVI Output

Dual DVI-I

■ 2nd VGA Output

Yes

The now-familiar SLI connector. A pair of 7900's would destroy everything in their path.



Intel-based CPU performance.

We ran the 7900 through our testing regime, which included both synthetic FutureMark gaming benches, 3DMark05 and 06, and real world benchmarks, F.E.A.R. and the X³ Reunion demo bench, to see if the G71 had what it takes to reclaim the King of the Hill position.

One thing we need to note immediately is that although not much has been said about improvements in this area, the IQ (Image Quality) of the 7900 is much better than last-generation NVIDIA offerings. The characteristic NVIDIA texture 'fuzz' is largely eliminated, as is the peculiar shadow tearing effect which can be seen so clearly in the 3DMark05 nature bench. It seems that the added power of the G71 has allowed NVIDIA to focus the GPU on rendering in high quality by default. The 7900 GTX now matches ATI competitors in this area, and removes one of the major gripes we have always had with NVIDIA cards.

Of course, they still can't handle both antialiasing and HDR at the same time which is strange, considering that this latest GPU seems to actually have the legs to cope with this kind of strain.

Using the latest publicly available ForceWare drivers, version 84.21, we were very impressed that these first cards ran so flawlessly using the driver version available at the launch date. No crashes or performance problems were observed throughout testing.

And yes, the performance is absolutely stellar. We found that playing F.E.A.R. at 1,600 x 1,200, with all details maxed out and FSAA turned off, the 7900 managed to keep its minimum framerate above the 25fps playable threshold. With 41% of frames between 25fps and 40fps, and the remaining 59% above 40fps, this game was absolutely perfectly playable at this resolution.

Enabling 4x FSAA hurt a bit, but this is an extreme setting that only a dual X1900XTX setup could pull. Still, a minimum framerate of 14fps and maximum of 53fps is pretty impressive for a single GPU system.

In X³ Reunion the 7900 was even more impressive. At 1,600 x 1,200, again with no FSAA but everything else turned up to maximum, this benchmark averaged 73.3fps. Like X2, the latest game benefits from NVIDIA's use of UltraShadow for stencil shadows, which is why at the same settings, the X1900XTX was some 20fps behind (but this doesn't detract from the grunt of the 7900 GTX at all). With FSAA on, the framerate tumbled to 45.6fps, but again, this demanding game would only really run acceptably at this resolution with a more expensive, more power-hungry CrossFire system behind it.

At the standard benchmark run in 3DMark05, at 1,024 x 748 without FSAA or AA enabled, a result of 8,951 was well below the 10,700 recorded by the Sapphire X1900XTX we tested last month. However, at 1,600 x 1,200, with FSAA and AA both turned on, the 7900 was still posting 6,587, while the R580-based card had fallen to 6,150. So it seems that the higher clock and 90nm process of the G71 really pays dividends when dipping heavily into the pixel shading calculations at high resolutions.

And finally, the most demanding synthetic gaming benchmark available today - 3DMark06. The 7900 was good for 5,992 at the standard resolution of 1,280 x 1,024. Pumping this up to 1,600 x 1,200 only saw this score fall to 5,150. For reference, a pair of X1900XTX cards in CrossFire configuration managed 7,616 in the standard 3DMark06 run.

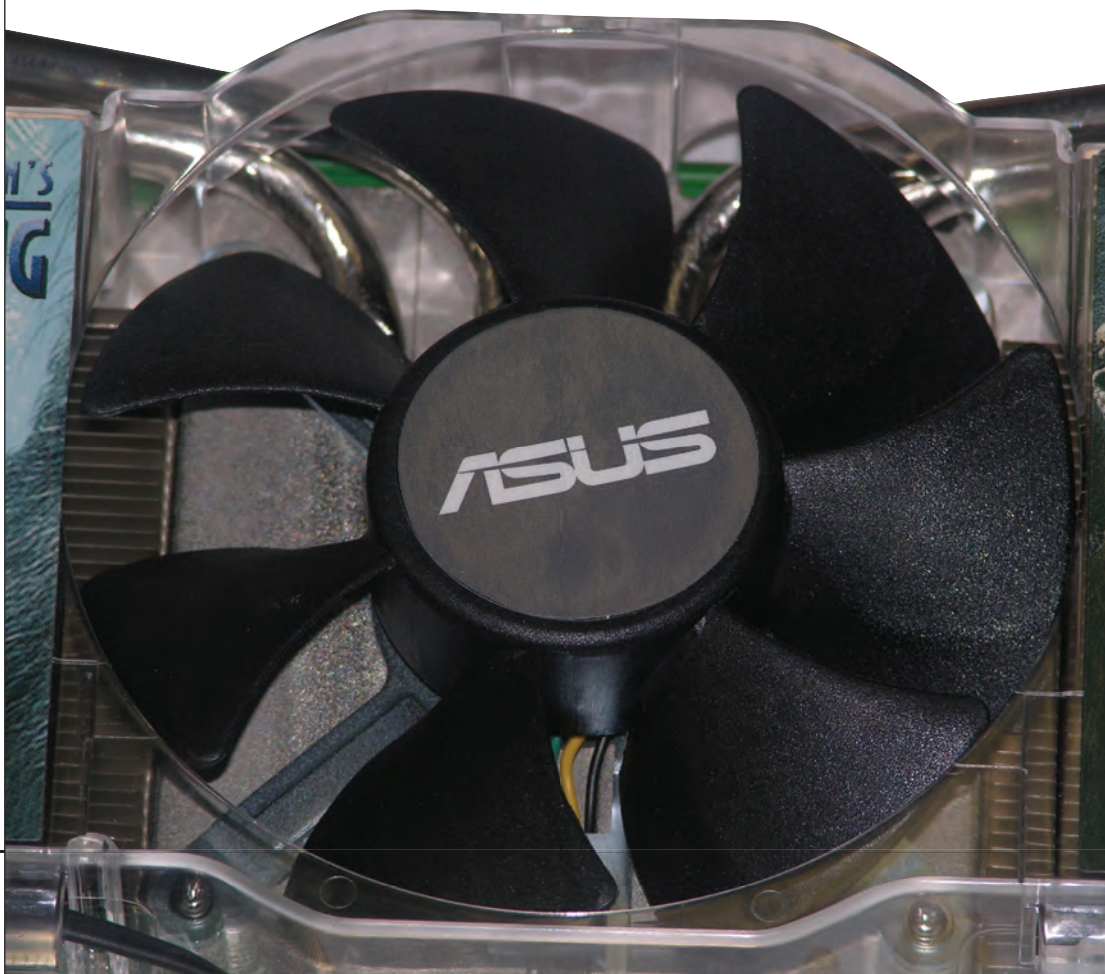
The performance of the 7900 GTX is, to say the least, quite startling. The X1900XTX does still manage to stay ahead in certain applications and at certain resolutions, but in our opinion the 7900 GTX succeeds in regaining the gold and the glory for NVIDIA. And the improved IQ is the real kicker. Does this mean that the G71 and its 90nm manufacturing process will rule the global extreme gaming market? Not necessarily, but at the moment this card is without a doubt the single-GPU world leader, by a small but tangible margin. **NAG**

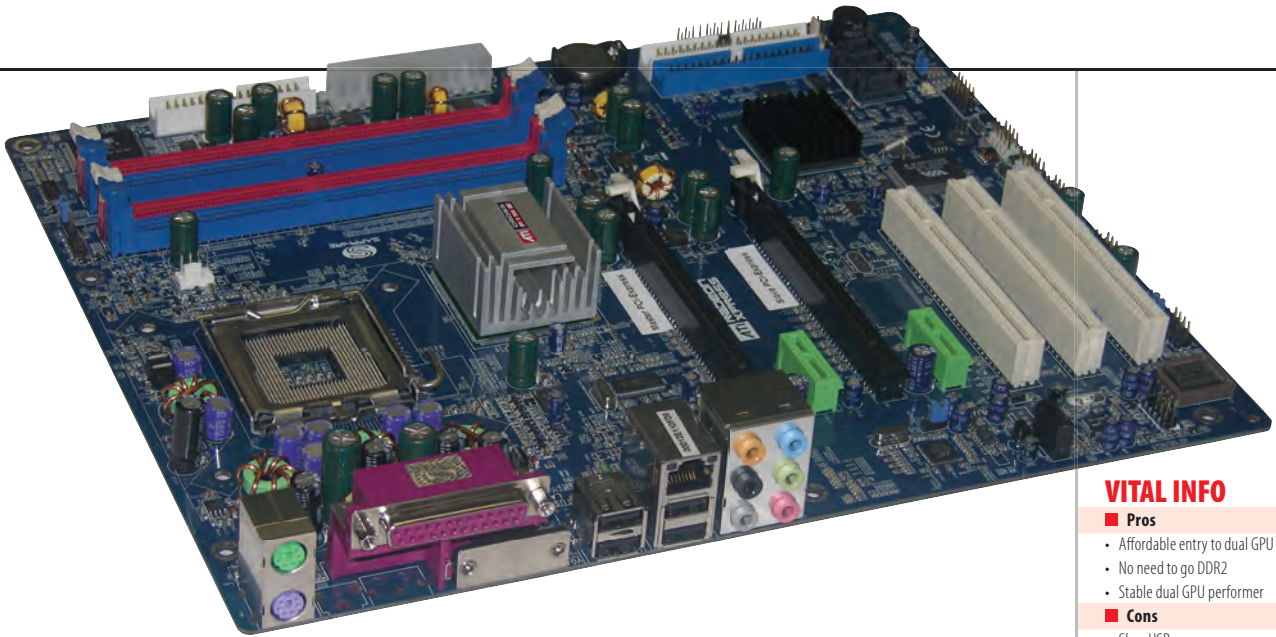


These heat pipes keep the new GTI CPU and supporting GDDR3 commendably cool



Although the card is a dual-slot design, the single large cooling fan never becomes a noisy irritation





SAPPHIRE PURE CROSSFIRE II

SAPPHIRE'S PURE RANGE OF motherboards not only has an interesting name, but it includes some interesting features too. What's most intriguing to us is the wide range of options this company has made available from the base of a single, clearly very versatile chipset.

This manufacturer has really gone right ahead and thrown its lot in with Canadian GPU stars ATI. The PURE family of products, at least until the range-topping new 3200-based board becomes available, is built around the promising but largely uninspiring Radeon Xpress 200 chipset, also known as the 480. From this starting point, the company has crafted a wide variety of offerings, supporting both the latest Intel and AMD CPUs, dual GPU applications, thanks to support for CrossFire graphics cards, and a wide range of budget points.

With this foundation the company addresses the full range of users, from enthusiasts to those looking for an affordable media centre PC. The PURE CrossFire II is a gaming-focussed offering supporting the ATI dual graphics card configuration, albeit in the form of dual 8x PEG slots rather than the full-blown 16x of the newer 3200 offering.

After the unique PCB colouring of the PURE Innovation (a great-looking white and red themed motherboard), this PC-I7RD400 platform may at first seem a little bland thanks to its more conventional blue board. And despite the pair of PEG slots, the features list continues this relatively lacklustre trend.

The thing is that the Xpress 200 was never intended to be a high-end player. Evidence of this is the fact that the chipset doesn't support the SATA II interface, only the first generation of SATA, with connectors for up to four such drives included on the board. There are also two EIDE channels and the good old floppy connector for legacy storage duties.

Eight USB 2.0 ports, four on the I/O panel and four via headers on the board, are powered by the SB450 Southbridge, which we find mated to the 200 chipset most often. It's a pity that this controller is so flawed however, resulting in very poor USB performance - around half of what USB 2.0 should do in fact.

These two negatives are however not enough to render the PURE CrossFire II a useless choice for gamers. Fortunately this offering is priced quite aggressively, particularly considering its CrossFire capabilities.

While technology purists and cynics alike lambasted the

original dual 8x PEG slot design, when using a pair of graphics cards in both the original NVIDIA SLI and ATI CrossFire offerings, the arrival of full-speed 16x slots in the SLI 32X and ATI 3200 chipset has demonstrated that the solutions available today don't necessarily need the full bandwidth on offer by the PCI-E bus. Performance of a CrossFire system using two 8x slots is just about identical to the same system using a newer chipset supporting 16x slots.

The arrival of the newer technology has driven the prices of older solutions down from the premium level into more affordable territory.

The Sapphire board can also save the upgrader some money, thanks to its support of the latest Intel dual core processors while still sticking to the DDR RAM standard. Since DDR2 still enjoys no real performance advantages over DDR (in fact, most would argue that with its lower latencies the older equipment actually delivers better performance), sticking to this standard relieves the upgrading user of the additional financial burden of having to shell out for another gigabyte of newer memory sticks for no tangible benefit.

Although the BIOS on this platform is adequate, there aren't that many tweaking options to fiddle with. That said, if you're persistent you can squeeze some additional performance from your parts using these settings, but it's certainly nothing like the overclock-friendly BIOSes found in offerings from competing brands.

With a Pentium 670 running at its stock 3.8GHz frequency, the PURE CrossFire II was stable, although this thermally-challenged CPU did occasionally stray a touch high on the temperature front. With a pair of X1900XTX cards in place, the platform was consistently behind the dual 16X Asus we used for our CrossFire test last month, but very marginally so. Besides, on a 3DMark05 score of over 14,000, how much difference does a few hundred points really make?

Overall the Sapphire PURE CrossFire II is a very good platform, and one of the most affordable entry points into the world of the dual GPU configuration. Although its feature set could be richer (i.e. a working USB implementation and support for SATA II), it comes recommended nonetheless. Bland it may be, even technologically speaking, but it works, very well in fact, and was stable throughout testing. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Affordable entry to dual GPU
- No need to go DDR2
- Stable dual GPU performer

■ Cons

- Slow USB
- Lack of SATA II

■ Supplier

Esquire 0861700000

■ Internet

www.sapphiretech.com

■ RRP

£1,400

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ GPU

ATI Radeon Xpress 200 CrossFire

■ Platform

Intel Pentium 4 (LGA775 Socket) (Dual Core X40, Northwood, Prescott 3.8GHz+)

■ FSB

800/1,066MHz

■ Memory Bus

Dual DDR400 x 4 (4GB max)

■ Slots

2 x PCI-E X16, 2 x PCI-E X1, 3 x PCI

■ Ports

USB 2.0 (4 + 4) / 2 x IEEE 1394, SPDIF, FDD, 1 x Com via header, 1 x Parallel, 2 x ATA133, 4 x SATA, SATA RAID 0/1 (4)

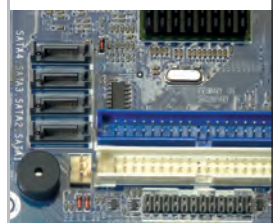
■ Ethernet

Gigabit Ethernet

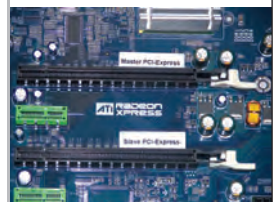
■ Audio

HD 8-channel Audio

Storage connectors all neatly arranged, pity these are only vanilla SATA slots though



Sapphire has even thoughtfully labelled the PEG slots, which many manufacturers omit to do



ASUS EN7800GT TOP SILENT

WE'RE SURE THAT ALL of you know how we at NAG feel about passively cooled graphics cards. They're fine for something that needs to be quiet and unobtrusive, like a media centre PC perhaps, but for actual gaming we are less convinced. If it's a totally silent gaming rig you absolutely must have, water-cool your high-end GPU yourself.

Well, we have another one. It's the latest, most powerful iteration of the Asus Silent series, in this case the EN7800GT TOP. Not only is it the most potent card to feature the company's Silencer passive cooling system, it's also a TOP variant, which means that the manufacturer has already boosted its clocks for you.

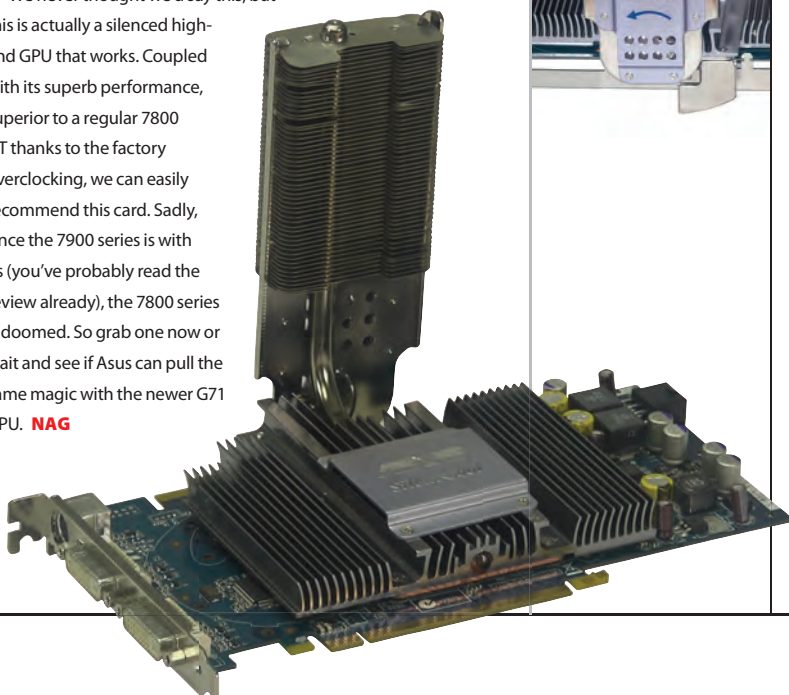
The Silencer unit has been constantly improved since we first saw it. For instance, it is easier than ever to swivel the top-mounted heat-dissipating fins to the position they need to be in for best operation (vertical, basically), with no fiddling around with tiny screws and washers as on the first silenced cards we tried.

This TOP version's core is 20MHz up on the standard 7800 GT at 420MHz, while the memory has been boosted by a full 120MHz (or 240MHz effective), bringing it to within 30MHz of the regular 7800 GTX reference specifications. We know that the higher frequencies of the X1800 XT TOP can make the HSF pretty noisy at times, so we were concerned that this overclock would damage the Silencer.

The FutureMark benches came back with some pretty excellent results for the GT. The factory overclock clearly worked well. In 3DMark05, at 1,024 x 768 without FSAA or AA enabled, the card was pulling 6,570 points. Cracking FSAA up to 4x and AA all the way to 16x, and it barely flinched, still managing 6,471. Even at 1,600 x 1,200, with 4x FSAA and 16x AA, 3,513 points was a very good result. In 3DMark06 the story was similar. This card managed runs of 3,577 at 1,280 x 1,024 with no FSAA.

And the temperature? It got very hot, quickly pushing beyond 100°C and making the metal bits impossible to touch, but the card soldiered on at full performance. That said, an hour and a half of full-on gaming wilted it, with the system suddenly restarting itself to protect the GPU from meltdown. A couple of additional case fans, positioned to move cool air over the Silencer, should do wonders here, though.

We never thought we'd say this, but this is actually a silenced high-end GPU that works. Coupled with its superb performance, superior to a regular 7800 GT thanks to the factory overclocking, we can easily recommend this card. Sadly, since the 7900 series is with us (you've probably read the review already), the 7800 series is doomed. So grab one now or wait and see if Asus can pull the same magic with the newer G71 GPU. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

Pros

- Great performance
- Silent
- Redesigned Silencer much easier to manipulate

Cons

- Maximum of two hours of hard gaming without case fans backing it up

Supplier

Axiz (011) 237-7000

Internet

www.axiz.co.za

RRP

N/A

Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

GPU

7800 GT (G70)

Manufacturing process

110nm TSMC

Transistors

300 million

Pipeline configuration

24/16 (Texture/Pixel pipes)

Clock frequencies

420MHz core, 620MHz GDDR (1.24GHz effective)

Memory

256MB GDDR3

Interface

PCI-E

Cooler

Dual-slot quad-heatpipe with single large fan

Dual-DVI

Yes

TV-Output

Yes

SLI-capable

Yes

Silencer swivel function now clearer, marked and easier to use, than ever before



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VIZO LUXON

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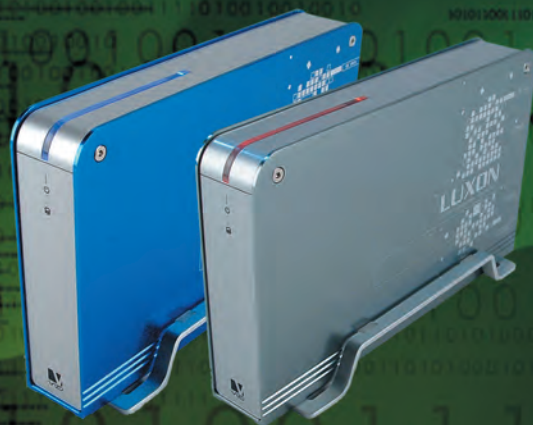
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SPEEDLINK GREEN LIGHTNING WHEEL

THERE'S NO DOUBT ABOUT it, the Green Lightning Wheel is very affordable and you get what you pay for.

As a cheap wheel and pedal combo for the Xbox, the Green Lightning Wheel is passable. Made entirely from black and green plastic, it feels more solid than it really is. The wheel sits comfortably on a flat table surface (but not on a lap), while the foot pedals rest easy on the floor. The pedals

are too thin, as if they were designed for tiny children's feet - another side-effect of cost-cutting cheapness.

The wheel isn't force-feedback, no matter how much it wishes to be. A basic dual-shock vibrating unit hides inside and vibrates expectantly when you bump into walls in a game.

The wheel can be calibrated to three sensitivity levels, namely 30 degrees, 60 degrees and 90 degrees. Naturally, the higher count results in twitch turning and just breathing on the wheel will make your car flip out and kill people.

The real problem with the Green Lightning Wheel comes in when it is actually used. Most games are completely unplayable on it. Burnout Revenge refused to play along - the car unmanageable from behind the wheel. Colin McRae Racing was equally un-fun, with the wheel acting obtuse towards allowing proper control of the car.

So be warned. The Green Lightning Wheel is cheap, and alluringly so. But consider first shopping around for similarly priced wheels if you really need one on a tight budget. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- It works...

■ Cons

- ...not very well

■ Supplier

PC Savers [011] 786-5313

■ Internet

www.pcsavers.co.za

■ RRP

R490.00

■ Reviewer

Miktar Dracon

SPECS

■ Weight

1.2kg

■ Buttons

13

■ Colour

Black / Green

■ Features

- Vibration Feedback
- Rubberised side grips
- D-pad directional buttons
- LED denoting Analogue / Digital mode
- 2 Analogue paddle switches



SPEEDLINK REDEEMER

THERE ARE TWO CONSTANTS in the universe. Horses (if you believe Planet of the Apes) and gamers who insist that console first-person shooters can only be played with a keyboard and mouse duet.

Thankfully most console gamers already know this isn't true, and that a console-developed FPS plays just as well on the analogous input of dual analogues as a PC-developed FPS does with a more immediate keyboard and mouse. It is simply a matter of design.

But that won't stop companies from trying to develop a product that will 'satisfy' the need of PC FPS gamers who want to play console FPS titles, but require a keyboard and mouse.

The Redeemer is a basic translator. You simply plug in a mouse and keyboard (either PS2 or USB), and the Redeemer sends a 'translated' signal to the Xbox. So, when you move your mouse, the view in the game will respond in kind. The translation isn't perfect though. The game is still thinking that you're twiddling on thumb sticks - the Redeemer simply fakes the input.

As a result, not everything works. For

example, typing on the keyboard won't actually input text when you need to enter your name or name a 'savegame'. You'll still need to scroll through letters, selecting them.

But as a translator, the Redeemer does the job. Mouse input is moderately accurate and you can get by in a game like Halo 2 using this setup, with minimal configuration. You can re-assign each key on the keyboard, if you choose.

As a niche product, the Redeemer seems frivolous to most, but might be just the thing for those who are tethered to the keyboard and mouse ethos. **NAG**



VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Lets you play FPS like a PC

■ Cons

- Doesn't work well

■ Supplier

PC Savers [011] 786-5313

■ Internet

www.pcsavers.co.za

■ RRP

R390.00

■ Reviewer

Miktar Dracon

SPECS

■ Features

- Takes both USB and PS2 keyboards
- Takes both USB and PS2 mice



RAZER PRO 1.6

RAZER'S LATEST PRODUCTS ARE its new Pro series of hardware, which include the Pro pad and the Pro 1.6 mouse. Both come in white, as opposed to the traditional black of most Razer products. But other than that, there isn't much new about them.

The Razer Pro 1.6 is essentially a Diamondback in an iPod's clothing. The mouse is white on the outside, but inside are the same technology and hardware of Razer's mainstream mouse. It supports 1,600dpi precision, a 16-bit data path and 6,400fps. It has seven programmable buttons, and a long 2.13 meter 'non-tangle' cord.

This can be both a good and bad thing. On the one hand, it has all the pluses of the Diamondback, such as good optics and an ambidextrous design. On the other hand, it also has all the minuses of the Diamondback, namely Razer's driver. Lately many gamers are complaining about Razer mice having issues in games like Quake 4. id Software has confirmed the bug, but is giving it a "... not our problem" attitude. This leaves it up to Razer to fix the drivers, which seem to be causing a bit of a problem. It must be somewhat embarrassing that the CPL's official mouse has bugs that prevent it from working with the CPL's official game. It also has the same bug that prevents some PCs from booting up when the mouse is plugged into the USB port, or detecting it until unplugged and plugged in again. These issues should be fixable with drivers, but are apparently causing Razer some difficulty.

Barring software issues, the mouse itself performs fairly well. It tracks most surfaces well and has low friction. However, it's not very fond of glass-based surfaces, even the ones that claim to be designed for optical mice. For left-handers, it's one of the best options on the market thanks to the traditional Razer ambidextrous design.

So, if you don't play Quake 4, don't have a high-end mouse and absolutely must have something that matches your iPod, this would be a good choice. Now you only need to find a matching case, monitor, keyboard, and speakers to go with your mouse and iPod. Or you could just buy an iMac. At least Razer makes a pad that complements it nicely. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros

- It's a Razer Diamondback, just in a different colour

Cons

- It's a Razer Diamondback, just in a different colour

Supplier

Proton Technology [011] 466-8888

Internet

www.prototech.co.za

RRP

R260 (Including Exactmat)

Reviewer

Toby Hudon

SPECS

Resolution

1,600 dpi, twice that of conventional high performance sensors

Buttons

7 independently programmable physical buttons with multiple macros

Motion

High speed motion detection, up to 40 ips and 15g

Frame rate

Over 6,400 frames per second [5.8 megapixels per second]

Dimensions

5.04" length x 2.5" width x 1.54" height



Razer includes seven programmable buttons, including strips like these on either side

Portable in Style



External Enclosure for 3.5" SATA Hard Drive



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THRUSTMASTER WIRELESS RECHARGEABLE 2-IN-1 GAMEPAD

AS THE CONSOLE AND PC worlds come closer together, at least from a hardware perspective, it makes sense that so many developers release titles on both for the most exposure these days. The downside of this is the radically different control mechanisms.

The easiest and most direct way to address this issue is to simply lay down a common standard. It's for this reason, as well as the fact that the ubiquitous nature of the console as well as its very purpose-orientated design, that the gamepad is becoming a more and more regular addition to a well-equipped gaming PC. There are games that you may feel short changed with if you don't have a gamepad these days.

Thrustmaster, now locally distributed by Bowline, are closely involved with the gaming market at all times, in an effort to understand its much focussed target audience and our needs. Recognising this trend of almost-converging paths in gaming platforms, the company decided that rather than develop one device for each platform, it would develop multi-platform input hardware instead. And the first shipment of sample Thrustmaster goodies we got for review included this interesting dual-platform wireless gamepad, which we had to pull out and try when Blazing Angels proved such a pain on the mouse and keyboard.

The moment you pick up the controller you're left with no doubt that this company's strongest focus is on manufacturing quality products. This controller is dual-platform as mentioned, in this case supporting both PC and PS2, and makes the conventional, but well-made, Sony Dual Shock 2 controllers feel a bit flimsy by comparison. It isn't just the added weight of the batteries which makes it feel more substantial either. The buttons and a pair of analogue control sticks smack of a potentially long working life.

Installation on either platform is simple. Naturally the interface is USB, with power coming via this bus as well, and the unit is picked up, identified and installed from the driver CD within seconds of being plugged in. The Thrustmaster Force Feedback applet is also installed by default, from which you

can access diagnostics to test both the multitude of buttons (12 in total, excluding the function buttons like start) and Vibration Force effects.

This wireless version just adds even more convenience to the mix. Simply lift the pad from its cradle and play. When you're done, replace the pad and it will recharge its pair of AAA batteries to be ready for your next gaming session. The wireless range is excellent, extending way beyond playable range for a PC screen, and more than far enough for a PS2 game played on a TV screen as well.

In addition, mapping controls to buttons on the Thrustmaster 2-in-1 is easy. Simply press the button marked 'Mapping', record your preferred control combination, and press the button again. Thanks to an onboard memory device, these settings are now stored for you forever.

Control of game titles, particularly those which work best on the gamepad like Prince of Persia: Two Thrones, Matrix: Path of Neo, and the aforementioned Blazing Angels, is precise and as intuitive as an analogue gamepad could be. It takes a bit of time to get used to, and on the rare occasion the controller seems to have moments of 'lag' as the signal is transmitted wirelessly to the base station and then forwarded from there to the CPU via USB, but these hiccups will go away if you just allow it to charge up to full power once more.

The appealing blue backlighting on the D-pad and buttons, in conjunction with the wireless hardware, means that those little cells are eaten up fairly quickly, and you need to recharge after every couple of hours of playtime. But you ought to take a rest from any screen every few hours anyway!

If you're looking for an excellent quality gamepad for your PC, or want to go wireless with your PS2, this Thrustmaster unit would be an excellent choice. It's the pervasive robustness of the unit, combined with some nice 'bonus' features, that make the Wireless Rechargeable

2-in-1 just a pleasure to use. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

Pros

- High quality
- Good wireless range
- Easy mapping of functions

Cons

- Batteries run flat quickly
- Price

Supplier

Bowline [021] 550-9700

Internet

www.bowline.co.za

RRP

R749

Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

Features

- PS2 and PC compatible (USB and PS2 connector)
- 2.4GHz 4-channel RF receiver
- USB docking/recharging station
- 2 Rechargeable Ni-Cad batteries included
- 2 Programmable, progressive triggers
- Vibration Feedback based on Immersion license
- Blue backlit buttons
- Rubberised handgrips and concave analogue sticks
- Internal memory chip stores last mapping configuration

It's fortunate that this tiny "off" button has been included, as this device seats batteries



We're not sure any of us even has enough fingers...





GIGABYTE POSEIDON CHASSIS

ALTHOUGH THE AURORA DIDN'T impress a colleague in the office that much, the Gigabyte Poseidon seemed well-equipped for its price. It's a regular-sized, midi-tower chassis which looks very slick in black with silver detailing. It also features a nice face, although this is entirely subjective, but we liked its symmetrical layout, large buttons and the inclusion of a front-mounted FireWire port.

Inside, the Poseidon has loads of room despite not being that big. The lack of a chassis rail, separating the PSU area from the main body of the chassis, is the reason for this impression. There are also two case-fans built in: one large 120mm exhaust fan residing just above the I/O panel, and a second one in front of the lower HDD cage.

The five 5¼-inch drive bays as well as the two 2-drive 3½-inch bays all feature a decent sliding rail system for easily mounting and dismounting any drives, which works well despite being entirely plastic. The lower cage, which is turned through 90-degrees so that the drives sit transversely, is well ventilated to allow the airflow from the front-mounted 120mm fan to flow through the case.

Although lacking the funnelling which today's TAC (Thermally Advantaged Chassis) offerings usually sport, the Poseidon makes up for this with a large grille on the right-hand panel which allows plenty of airflow, even if that air is somewhat less directed than by a funnel. There are even two pre-cut holes above the backing plates to run water-cooling pipes through.

All of this makes for a case which is not only easy to build a system into and work on, but it also succeeds pretty well in maintaining the temperature of the system being run in it. Our Pentium 4 670 can get pretty hot at its full 3.8GHz, but in the Poseidon it never reached a point where the system started shutting down from heat build-up. That said, it didn't keep the CPU that cool either, hovering at the 56°C mark while under load with a stock Intel HSF installed. Both 120mm fans were connected to a budget fan controller and running at their almost-inaudible lowest RPM settings at this point.

The Poseidon is a fairly nice chassis which, depending on how much you like its looks, isn't going to set your socks on fire. Fortunately, it won't be the cause of any hardware meltdowns either. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- Adequate thermal performance
- FireWire port on front panel
- Tool-less working environment

■ Cons

- Cons
- Lightweight construction materials feel flimsy

■ Supplier

Rectron (011) 203-1000

■ Internet

www.rectron.co.za

■ RRP

R750

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Dimensions

200mm x 440mm x 495mm (W x H x D)

■ Front bezel material

Aluminium

■ Colour

Silver/Black

■ Case features

Vented side panel

■ Body material

SECC

■ Net weight

8kg

■ 5¼-inch drive bays (external)

5

■ 3½-inch drive bays (external)

1

■ 3½-inch drive bays (internal)

4

■ Expansion slots

7

■ Compatible motherboards

ATX/micro-ATX

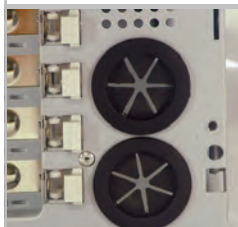
■ System fans

1 x 120mm front, 1 x 120mm with blue LEDs rear



TOP: Symmetrical button layout and FireWire both appealing

BOTTOM: Pre-cut holes make water cooling a breeze



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> Internal AUX audio out

> Include Low-Profile PCI bracket

> Bundle software:

Compro Tweak Y/C Utility, Ulead photo explorer 8.5SE, Movie factory 3SE, Videostudio 8SE



H900

> Hardware MPEG Encoding

> Built-in professional 3D Y/C separation chip

> Internal AUX audio out

> Include Low-Profile PCI bracket

> Bundle software:

Compro Tweak Y/C Utility, Ulead photo explorer 8.5SE, Movie factory 4SE, Videostudio 9SE



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CREATIVE LABS SOUNDBLASTER AUDIGY 2 ZS NOTEBOOK

MOBILE GAMING IS RAPIDLY becoming a very attractive proposition. And no, we're not talking about the PSP or even cellphone-based gaming here, but the PC platform we all know and love.

As laptops have become more capable of running the latest gaming titles, and today high-end notebooks can stand largely toe-to-toe with gaming desktop rigs if you have the cash, this trend has grown stronger in the market by feeding upon itself, to the point where mobile computing can now be had with high-end 7800 or even 7900 GTX parts embedded into mobile systems (or even a pair of these monster GPUs in SLI mode!).

However, with processors and GPUs matching the performance of desktop equivalents, and larger and crisper LCD displays than ever before built into these mobile powerhouses, one element of the laptop has stoically remained unsuitable for the most dedicated gamer. Notebook audio solutions are, as a rule, rather poor in this age of SoundBlaster X-Fi. No on-board mobile audio solution we have seen to date supported fully accelerated D3D capabilities or hardware-based buffers to ease some load off the CPU.

Although USB-based audio extension solutions are widely available from a range of reputable manufacturers, these are for the most part less than satisfactory if it's the most immersive gaming experience you're after. This is due to these offerings usually boasting pared-down feature sets and rather high CPU utilisation without massively boosting the quality of the integrated notebook audio solution.

Fortunately Creative Labs has come to the rescue with the release of this, the SoundBlaster Audigy 2 ZS Notebook. This is a fully-featured Audigy 2 solution built into a CardBus (the old PCMCIA) format specifically for the mobile gamer, and as such brings the entire repertoire of the over-featured SoundBlaster range to this rapidly growing market segment.

Installing the card is very reminiscent of any PCI-based Creative offering. Plug the unit into an available CardBus slot and launch the driver CD to install your new hardware, and

you're greeted by a familiar and comprehensive list of software to install, along with the drivers.

If you have a 5.1, 6.1 or 7.1 channel surround sound system, of particular interest is the THX Setup Console, which allows you to set and adjust your multiple channels to precisely suit your taste and needs. The remainder of the packages are the run of the mill Creative extras like WaveStudio, Smart Recorder and MediaSource Audio DVD player.

Due to the minimal amount of side panel with which to work with on a CardBus adapter, the SoundBlaster sports a combined digital out/headphone jack, combined digital/line/microphone input port, and a flat cellphone-like connection to which you can attach the included proprietary wiring set, terminating with three regular mini-jacks for multi-channel speaker sets.

Supporting all the standards you'll need for a rich and flexible audio experience, from gaming to listening to music, the Audigy ZS is quite a step up from conventional notebook audio. There's EAX 4.0, Dolby Digital, DTS, DVD-Audio, THX and ASIO 2.0, all sporting their full feature sets so that mobility need not compromise your audio capabilities.

With the Audigy ZSN installed on a Toshiba Satellite notebook with a Pentium M 725 (1.6GHz) CPU, and a set of Logitech 5.1 channel speakers attached via the wiring harness, the audio stepped up to a whole new level.

That said, you'd obviously need some decent speakers to get anything from this card. Creative thoughtfully include a pair of small headphones with the adapter, but these are not of particularly high quality and if you use them exclusively with the Audigy ZSN, you would barely notice the additional capabilities it offers.

In gaming, the Audigy performs admirably, even though the CardBus interface means that CPU utilisation is a bit higher on this platform than a regular PCI desktop card. However, support for the widely-supported EAX standard means you can enjoy all the benefits of immersive environmental audio effects you've come to expect of the EMU 2K10 audio processor. **NAG**

VITAL INFO

■ Pros

- All the clarity and features of a desktop SoundBlaster

■ Cons

- A fairly pricey add-on to what would already be an expensive gaming notebook

■ Supplier

Rectron [011] 203-1000

■ Internet

www.rectron.co.za

■ RRP

R1,190

■ Reviewer

Russell Bennett

SPECS

■ Features

- High Signal-to-Noise Ratio (SNR) exceeding 104dB using high linearity, low distortion 24-bit converters with resolutions of up to 192kHz

■ Playback

- 24-bit Digital-to-Analogue conversion of digital sources at 96kHz to analogue 7.1 speaker output, 192kHz for Stereo DVD-A

■ Recording

- 24-bit Analogue-to-Digital conversion of stereo analogue inputs at 96kHz sample rate



Wiring harness is provided for connecting surround-sound speakers to the flat CardBus card



Clearly space-constrained, Creative have crammed in features using multi-purpose jacks



Included headphones great for mobility, but not ultimate quality

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R 4589



ACER DUO T2300

MOBILE POWER

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1024MB DDR2-533Mhz Memory
Super Multi DVD Writer
ATI X1400 512MB Display Adapter
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PCMCIA Card Slot (for 3G/iBurst)
56K Modem
USB 2 & Firewire
Windows XP Professional



R 13989



POWERBALL
NEON PRO with
Rev Counter R329

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Professional LCD with Digital TN + Film Display
Excellent Picture Quality
NTAA (Non Touch Auto Adjustment)
Integrated 4-Port USB Hub
DVM (Dynamic Visual Mode)
- Improved Contrast & Color
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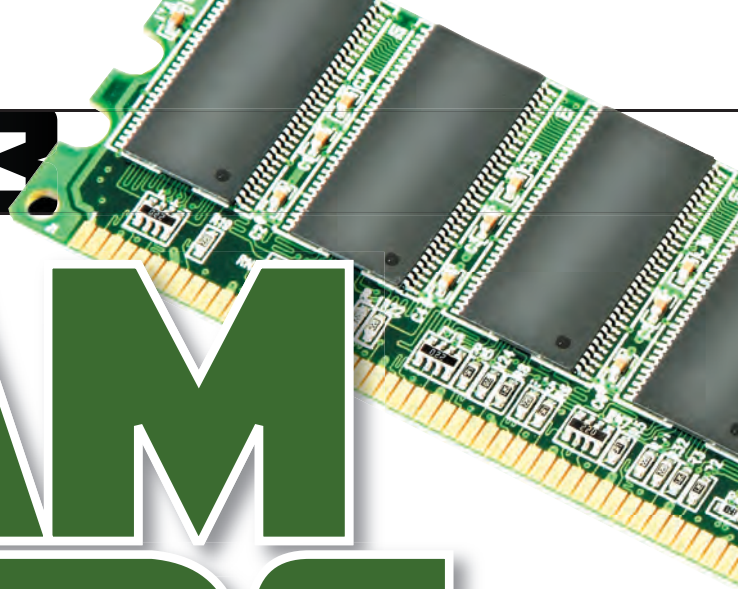


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RAM WARS



WE TAKE A LOOK THROUGH A WIDE VARIETY OF RAM MODULES, INCLUDING BOTH DDR AND DDR2 OFFERINGS, TO GET YOU DETAILS OF JUST WHICH MODULES WILL DO WHAT TO YOUR CAREFULLY-TUNED GAMING RIG...

EVEN MORE SO THAN most PC components, selecting the perfect RAM for your ultimate gaming rig is fraught with uncertainty, and there's so much to choose from out there.

When faced with this choice, 2GB of modules with just slightly higher latency figures, or one step down the MHz rung in terms of rated performance, can seem far more appealing. After all, pretty soon everyone will need 2GB anyway. The faster chips are likely to net a performance boost of at the most 10%, so blowing your budget on just one very speedy stick of RAM seems like an emotional decision – perhaps an infatuation with large shiny heatspreaders...

What's more, the improvements to your system which faster memory would yield are mostly only things which will show up in minute number discrepancies in repeat benchmark tests, and you are not benchmark-bound, right?

Well let's face the truth here my friends. First of all, isn't everyone pretty well infatuated with glossy, gleaming heatspreaders weighing down those boring DDR DIMMs? And secondly, we make this decision to spend that little bit more on other parts of our system for the fractional improvements it might offer over a 'lesser' part, right? We're gamers and enthusiastic

about the platforms on which we play games, which makes considerations like the highest benchmark 'figures' a relentless pursuit, without concern for cost.

With that in mind, we decided it was time to resolve one of the longest-raging debates in our segment of the IT world. What kind of RAM configuration should you be looking at if it's those last few hundred elusive benchmark results you desperately want to squeeze from your system? Or perhaps, which will enable you to run the latest title – the stunning Oblivion maybe, at slightly higher detail settings or with a few extra FPS smoothing the experience out. Which memory modules available today will offer the most benefit, at the most attractive price point?

We'll look at both the older DDR standard, which is still the more popular amongst enthusiasts, thanks in part to its association today with AMD-branded CPUs. It isn't only the integrated memory controller of an Athlon processor, however, that makes DDR quicker to respond to commands than DDR2. The newer parts sacrifice tight timings in the drive towards higher MHz ratings.

The differences between the two technologies dovetail rather nicely. In effect, DDR2 picks up where DDR left off. The older standard officially tops out at 400MHz, although 500MHz-plus

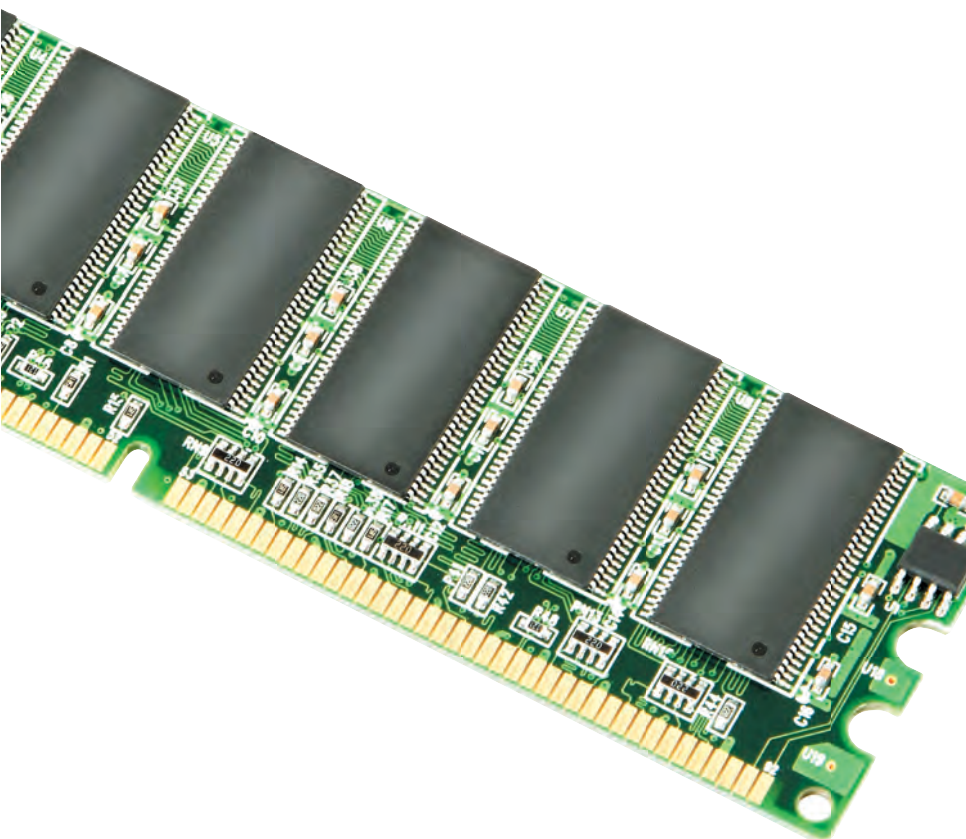
HOW WE TESTED

UNFORTUNATELY, OUR SUPPLIERS APPEAR to have gotten slightly confused this month, and some of those who sent through DDR DIMMs failed to send them through in pairs for dual-channel operation. To get around this problem, we tested all the DDR parts in single-channel, so that we could still see the performance differences between the brands. This makes comparing the DDR and DDR2 results (which all came in dual-channel configurations) a futile exercise, although we have included a baseline dual-channel DDR benchmark to help us gauge the performance deficit the lack of this technique causes, from which one could go ahead and calculate approximate dual-channel performance numbers.

Note the use of the word approximate, however.

For the DDR modules, we ran the excellent Asus A8R32-MVP Deluxe motherboard with a fairly old Athlon XP 3200+ ensconced in the CPU socket. The Asus EN7900 GTX we had in for review at the time was added to the platform. Identical Seagate 160GB SATA drives were also used for booting and running the benchmarking applications across both systems.

DDR2 parts were tested using a 3.6GHz P4 660 CPU in a Gigabyte Royal 955X-based motherboard. This board has proven its worth in RAM overclocking duties before, and yes, we will be benchmarking these parts at both their stock SPD-



overclocking specials are available from all the major enthusiast brands today. Where the slowest CAS latency of DDR is 3, this is the fastest possible setting on DDR2. The newer chips also sport a different package type, FBGA compared to TSOP-II, and runs at a lower voltage – 1.8V by default as opposed to 2.5V.

Like DDR's officially supported ceiling of 400MHz, which is fairly easily breached by pricier DIMMs these days, the highest supported DDR2 frequency of 667MHz was also rapidly exceeded. Today, RAM modules which can clock to well over 1,000MHz are fairly abundant from the likes of OCZ and Corsair. In fact, the Corsair modules have been available since very shortly after the new technology was launched.

Although the higher frequencies do make for faster data transfer speeds, this is quite effectively offset by the longer latencies needed on DDR2 to support these speeds, bringing the two technologies pretty much head-to-head. Intel's stubborn refusal to integrate a memory controller into its CPU micro architecture simply compounds this issue further, a fact which the integrated memory controller in AMD parts really capitalises on.

But let's see what the modules we have gathered up for this edition of H@rdc0r3 can do.

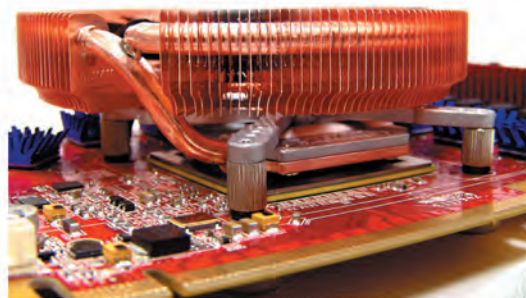
determined settings and after some BIOS tweaking.

Windows XP with SP2 was installed on the two test rigs, with the ForceWare 84.21 driver powering this latest GPU incarnation. Our benchmark suite consisted of Everest Ultimate Edition, SiSoft Sandra Professional 2005 SR3, and CPUBench 2003, although this application threw out very strange results on a number of the DDR2. To ensure that any variances these benches reported carried through to our specific focus, gaming, we ran 3DMark06 at its default resolution of 1,280 x 1,024 with no FSAA or AA, as well as F.E.A.R. at minimal graphics quality, but maximum system settings to stress the platform.

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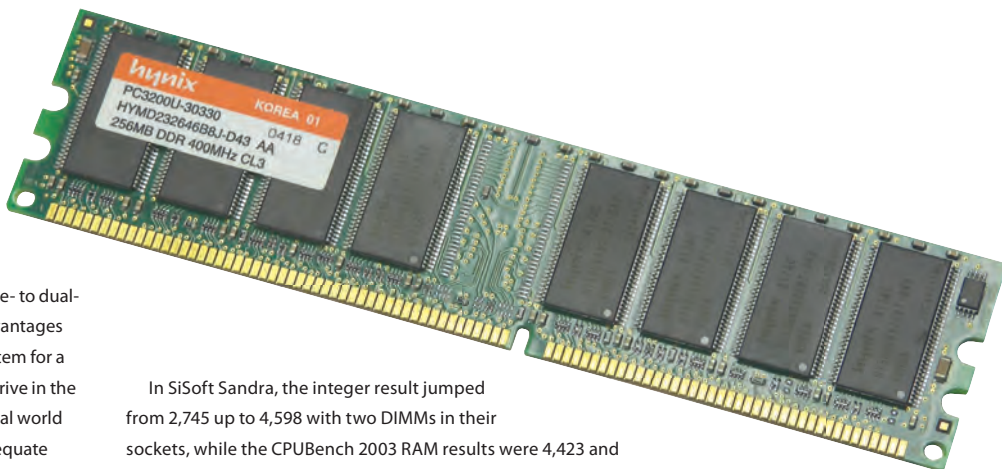
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THE FIRST GENERATION

HYNIX PC3200 256MB

NOT ONLY HAVE WE been able to use these lowly parts as an adequate indicator of the difference in performance one could expect moving from a single- to dual-channel configuration, it also neatly illustrates the advantages of memory capacity. Even with both DIMMs in the system for a total of 512MB, the swapping out of data to the hard drive in the F.E.A.R. benchmark destroyed the framerate in this real world test. 3DMark06 scores, interestingly enough, were adequate considering that only 512MB of RAM was installed (4,647 overall with a CPU score in the middle of this small group of 784).

The two dedicated platform-benchmarking applications are perfectly indicative of the relative performance of these parts. At the SPD-detected timings of 3-3-3-8, these Hynix parts recorded identical Everest latency readings of 58.3ns in both dual- and single-channel. Write speeds were also very close, 1,159MB/s in dual-channel and 1,029MB/s in dual-channel. The Read speeds were the major difference here, with dual-channel more than doubling the 2,982MB/s data read to 7,590MB/s.



In SiSoft Sandra, the integer result jumped from 2,745 up to 4,598 with two DIMMs in their sockets, while the CPUBench 2003 RAM results were 4,423 and 3,157 respectively.

Overclocking headroom didn't exist in these very 'vanilla' modules. Any attempts at boosting frequency or tightening timings, simply resulted in the system refusing to boot.

That said, for entirely standard (and therefore extremely cheap) memory modules, these Hynix examples didn't embarrass themselves, and actually outperformed the KingMax PC3200 at stock timings, in single-channel configuration. You may not get a lot of performance headroom, but you do get solid, reliable RAM with dead average performance.

CORSAIR PC3200C2

THE C2 AT THE end of this product name indicates tight CAS latency. In fact, pretty tight timings all around at an SPD-detected 2-3-3-6 at the stock 400MHz operating frequency. In this case, low latency is the key to some truly stellar performance.

These may not be the 600MHz-plus DIMMs which focussed overclocking DDR is capable of today, but nonetheless, the C2 modules are clear performance leaders with an Everest latency of 50.4 ns, and read and write speeds of 1,986MB/s and 4,342MB/s respectively, backed up by SiSoft integer results of 2,980.

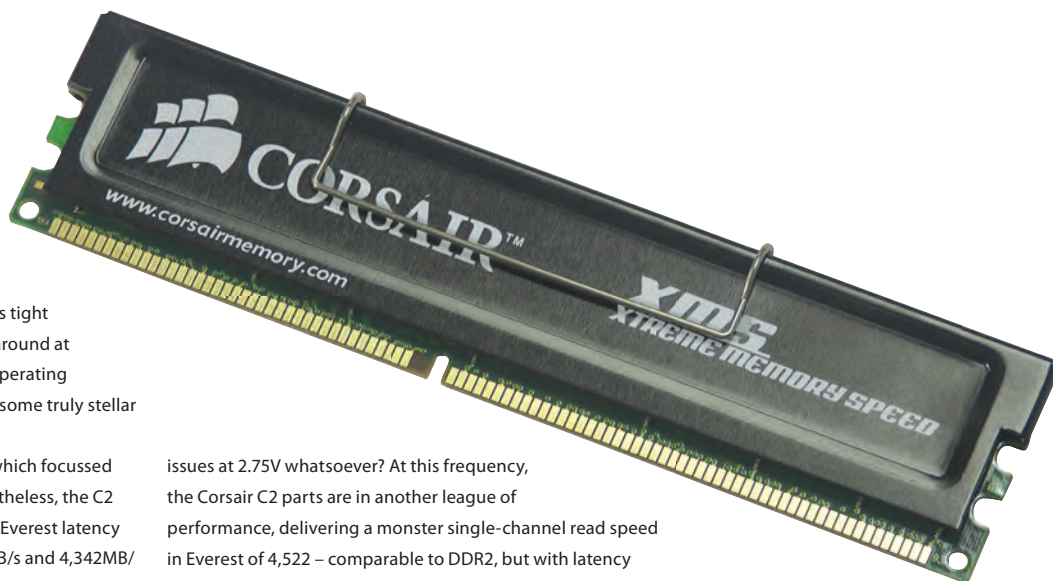
This translates well into the gaming portions of our benchmark runs, resulting in 3DMark06 figures a good 100 points above the nearest competitor, at 4,788. F.E.A.R. also liked the low latencies, posting an average framerate of 97fps at stock, slower only than the overclocked Legend DDR parts.

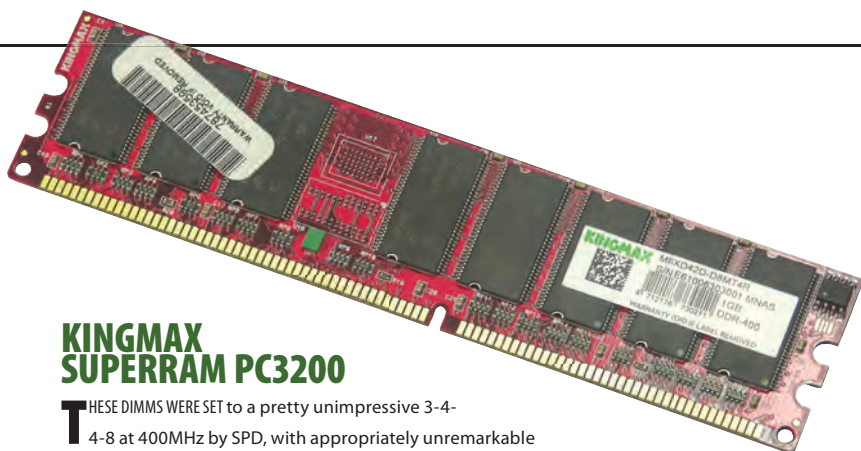
Speaking of overclocking, these Corsair modules have superb headroom for practitioners of this art. How about 500MHz with only slightly relaxed timings of 2.5-3-3-6 and no stability

issues at 2.75V whatsoever? At this frequency, the Corsair C2 parts are in another league of performance, delivering a monster single-channel read speed in Everest of 4,522 – comparable to DDR2, but with latency results now dipping below 50ns.

Interestingly, the 3DMark06 result was barely affected by the overclock, although F.E.A.R. managed to breach the 100fps average threshold.

There are specifically designed overclocking modules that will do more, like Mushkin and OCZ, but sadly these are difficult to come by in the SA market, and while OCZ was sending us review samples, these hadn't arrived by the deadline date, which would appear to hand the victory in this round to Corsair.





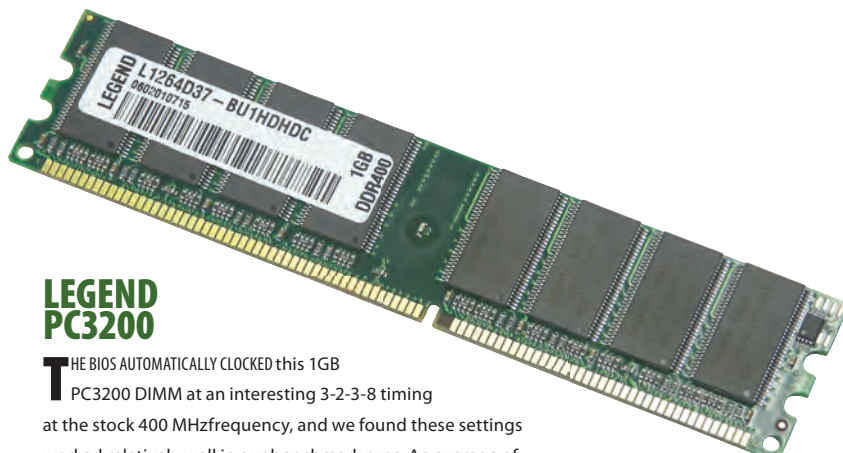
KINGMAX SUPERRAM PC3200

THESE DIMMS WERE SET to a pretty unimpressive 3-4-4-8 at 400MHz by SPD, with appropriately unremarkable performance figures as a result. Latency of 57.8ns and read and write speeds of 2,989MB/s and 1,145MB/s showed the substandard performance of this RAM in the context of our roundup.

The gaming benchmarks supported this, with an average F.E.A.R. framerate of 92fps, the slowest of the group including the undernourished Hynix DIMMs. Forcing the timing to 2-3-3-6 dropped the latency to 55.6ns and upped the F.E.A.R. framerate to 94fps - still in no way impressive.

What's more, overclocking beyond these timing adjustments proved absolutely impossible. The KingMax DIMMs refused to boot at even a single MHz above the stock 400MHz. At 432MHz it would POST, and then stall booting the OS itself.

Easily the weakest of the four manufacturers included in this roundup then.



LEGEND PC3200

THE BIOS AUTOMATICALLY CLOCKED this 1GB PC3200 DIMM at an interesting 3-2-3-8 timing at the stock 400 MHz frequency, and we found these settings worked relatively well in our benchmark runs. An average of 96fps in F.E.A.R and Everest read and write results of 4,258MB/s and 1,611MB/s suggest decent performance. But considering the unassuming appearance of these modules, Legend had a surprise in store for us.

At 2.5-2-3-6, these modules would still POST and boot Windows. Even more surprisingly, at 2.5-3-4-6 the Legend units had no problems booting at an excellent 466MHz, with tangible performance benefits.

Latency dropped to 47.9ns (a full 11ns down from the 58.9ns recorded at stock settings), and SiSoft Sandra's integer figure rose to 2,914 from 2,614 at stock. Once again, we found that the overclock barely affected 3DMark06 scores, but the average F.E.A.R. framerate went up to 101fps. So the extra performance was definitely being tapped in this real world bench.

For 'regular' DDR RAM, this is an astonishing result, all but matching the far more enthusiast-focussed Corsair PC3200C2 offering running at an even more aggressive DRAM frequency. It looks like Legend's reputation as being great at building overclocking RAM is secure, as these units are very cool indeed.

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THE NEXT GENERATION

CORSAIR XMS25400C4

LIKE ITS SMALLER BRETHREN in the DDR component of this test, the C4 tagged at the end of this model name indicates the CAS latency. In the world of DDR2, 4-4-4-12 at the stock 670MHz frequency is actually rather tight, although you do have to force this RAM to these timings (the SPD settings being the more conventional 5-5-5-12). At its intended timings, these modules managed a latency of 84.9ns, but it's the read and write speeds that DDR2 really boost - in this case 5,857MB/s and 2,342MB/s.

SiSoft's RAM integer result of 4,962 is pretty much exactly what you can expect of any PC5400 module, and the F.E.A.R. average framerate is similarly run of the mill at 149fps. However, the C4 DIMMs did hide some overclocking potential, still running stable at 732MHz with the same 4-4-4-12 timings.

At this clock speed, the latency in Everest dropped to 77.2ns, but F.E.A.R. and 3Dmark06 results actually got worse



interestingly enough, suggesting that the C4 is really best run at its suggested 670MHz. 3Dmark06 at stock settings returned 5,187, which plummeted to 4,646 at the overclocked frequency, and no amount of voltage adjustment could repair this damage.

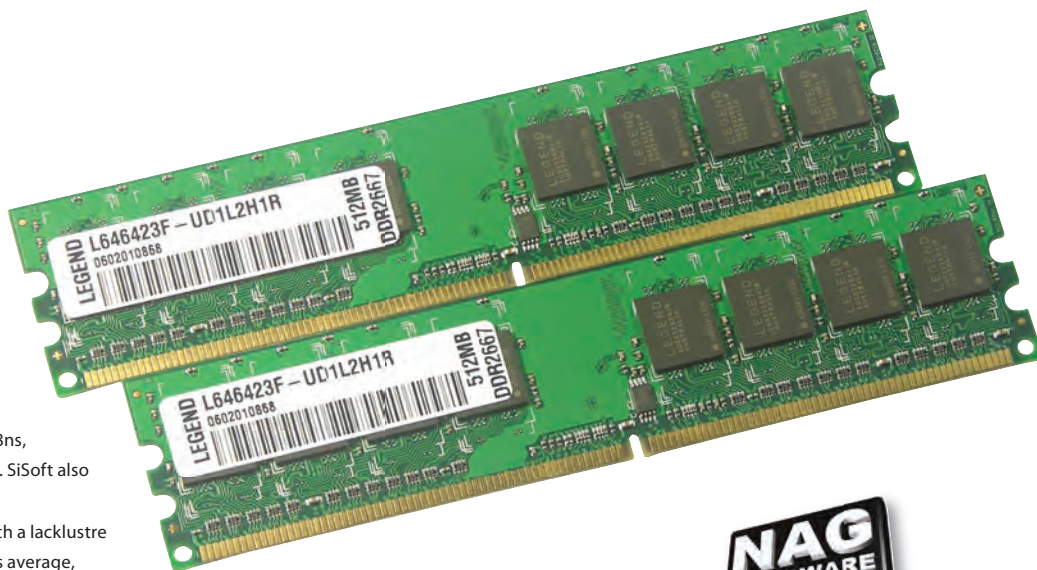
These XMS25400C4 modules could really be considered the baseline for DDR2, posting perfectly average results across the board, whether at stock or overclocked frequencies.

LEGEND DDR25400

AT THEIR STOCK FREQUENCIES and SPD-detected 5-5-5-15 timings, the Legend DDR2 seemed a little behind its competitors with a latency of 88.8ns, 5,701MB/s read speed and 2,148MB/s write speed. SiSoft also reported a very average integer result of 4,892.

Although 3Dmark06 reflected these results with a lackluster 4,690, F.E.A.R. posted an excellent result of 162fps average, suggesting that these Legend DIMMs would perform well in any gaming system. What's more, like its DDR counterparts, these PC5400 modules really started to shine when we started pushing the frequency.

The DIMMs finally topped out at an amazing 860MHz - almost 200MHz over their rated frequency, with similarly impressive performance gains all around. The SiSoft result jumped to 5,344,



latency fell to 72.0ns and read and write speeds leaped to 6,295MB/s and 2,314MB/s respectively.

F.E.A.R. now averaged 171fps and we experienced absolutely no hiccups during testing at this extreme overclock. If you're prepared to fiddle with your BIOS a little bit, these Legend modules represent amazing value for money in the DDR2 range.



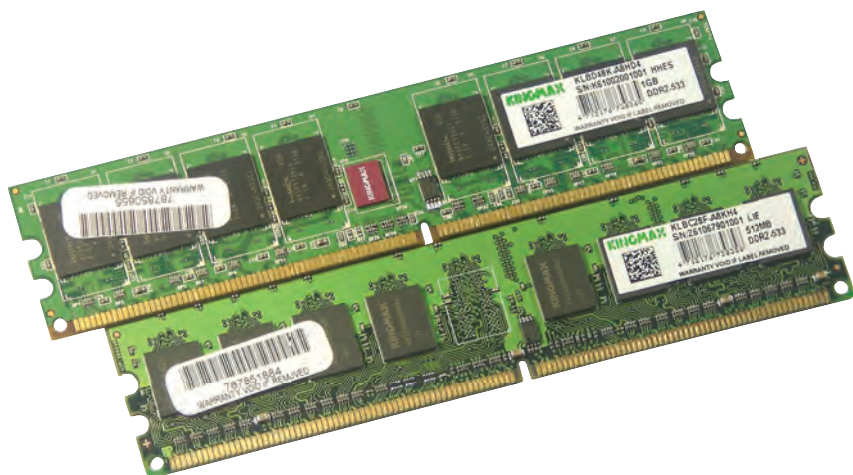


CORSAIR XMS26400 PRO

ALTHOUGH THE BIOS AUTO detected these modules at 670MHz and 5-5-5-15, the PC6400 label means that these overdressed DIMMs should be happier at 800MHz, which indeed proved to be the case. With timings down to 4-4-4-12, this MHz boost brought the latency on these parts down from 88.9ns to 74.9ns, write speeds went up from 1,964MB/s to 2,308MB/s, and read speeds from 5,814MB/s to 6,027MB/s.

This 800MHz Pro series set was also one of the very few on which the boosted MHz was actually noticed by 3DMark06. This synthetic score went up from 5,045 to 5,207 at its rated frequency. An average F.E.A.R. FPS of 165fps supported this conclusion. Clearly the Pro series is designed with gamers in mind.

Those distinctive massive heatspreaders complete with a bank of hyperactive LEDs are not aesthetically pleasing at all in our opinion. We would actually recommend you go with the regular XMS26400 parts, which are cheaper and in our tests all but mirrored the performance of these Pro series chips. The Pro variants did give a slightly higher average framerate in F.E.A.R. though. So if gaming is your sole aim and cost not a concern, there is a couple of extra FPS to be had from the Pro sticks over conventional PC6400 parts, although the platform benches came up with identical results.



KINGMAX DDR24200

THE SLOWEST OF THE DDR2 memory in our roundup this month, these PC4200 parts had a mammoth task ahead of them. At the detected stock timings of 4-4-4-12, despite the low 533MHz frequency, there was no chance whatsoever, with a latency of 89.8ns, an Everest write result of 1,519MB/s, and read speed of 4,073MB/s.

3DMark06 quite liked these modules, posting a score of 5,192 despite the low frequency they were running at. That said, our real world gaming title F.E.A.R. was less complimentary, with the system now only capable of averaging 144fps – clearly cementing these KingMax units at the bottom of the DDR2 pile.

Overclocking with these DIMMs was not a pleasant experience. Timings could be dropped to 3-3-3-10, with a miniscule boost in performance, but the moment we messed with frequencies, Windows stability went clear out the door. Suddenly we had corrupted registry entries as well as data on our hard drive (by far the most violent reaction to tweaking we witnessed throughout our tests).

In short, we'd suggest staying away despite the peculiar 3DMark score. PC5400 is not that much pricier, and you'd regret not taking this speedier route.

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KINGMAX DDR25400

LIKE THEIR SLOWER BRAND brethren, these KingMax DIMMs were problematic during benchmarking. Their stock performance at the SPD-detected 5-5-5-15 670MHz was poor. Latency of 88.6ns, 5,814MB/s on read operations and 1,956MB/s on writes barely beat out the company's undernourished 533MHz parts.

Stranger and stranger though, these modules scored lower than the 533MHz KingMax units in 3DMark06, but proved slightly superior in the real world of F.E.A.R. with an average of 149fps – still comfortably slower than any of the other brands on test.

Once more, overclocking was simply not an option.

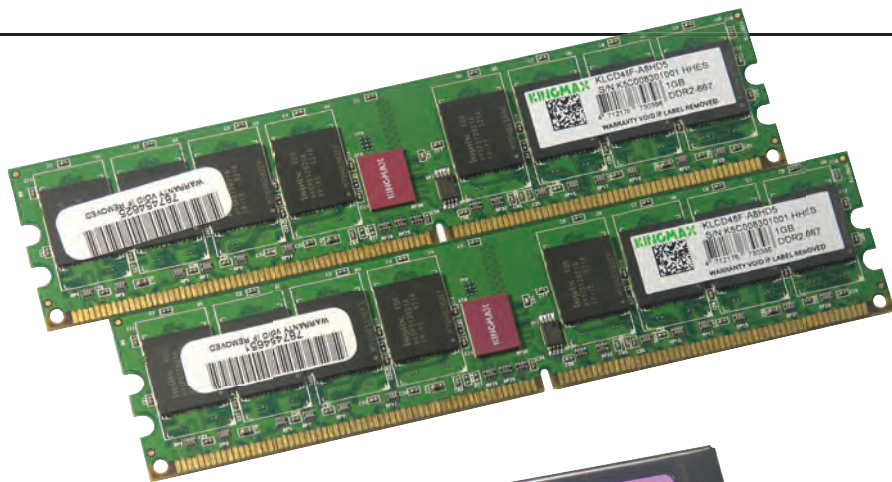
CORSAIR XMS28000UL

THIS IS WHERE DDR2 is going. This is what DDR2 was created for. These parts are rated at the full-blown 1,000MHz, and although OCZ now have 1,100MHz DIMMs on the market, the 8000UL series has been with us just about since DDR2 was first introduced.

The problem with the 8000UL was that, at its launch date, it enjoyed just about no support. Motherboard vendors simply didn't make components that would work at the full speed of these Corsair offerings, therefore rendering the fact that they could clock up to this stratospheric frequency largely academic. PC6400 parts could do 800MHz just as well with similar performance, despite the remarkably tight timings which the 8000UL DIMMs are capable of (3-3-3-9).

Today, however, it's a slightly different story. But let's start with stock settings, which SPD detected as 4-4-4-12 at 670MHz. Already these Corsair parts were off to a good start (despite a relatively lacklustre latency of 84.1ns). Read speed of 6,340MB/s and write speed of 2,664MB/s were right at the head of the class, and that's before we started boosting the frequencies. 3DMark06 results are also clear class leaders in this group, at 5,506, with only F.E.A.R. letting the product down slightly by posting an average of 169fps.

Start cranking the RAM up (with a voltage increase of 0.4 for



stability), and the performance starts to become absolutely surreal. How does an Everest read speed of 8,122MB/s grab you, at a latency of 72.0ns? That's at a monstrous 980MHz, with timing backed off to 4-4-4-9.

3DMark06 received a substantial performance boost from this tweaking; now racking up 5,980 points. Naturally F.E.A.R., too, gained impressively, now managing to average 186fps, way beyond anything else here.

This kind of performance is not cheap, but it is deeply impressive. The sheer scale of this achievement wins the Corsair XMS28000UL modules this DDR2 component of the test, hands down.

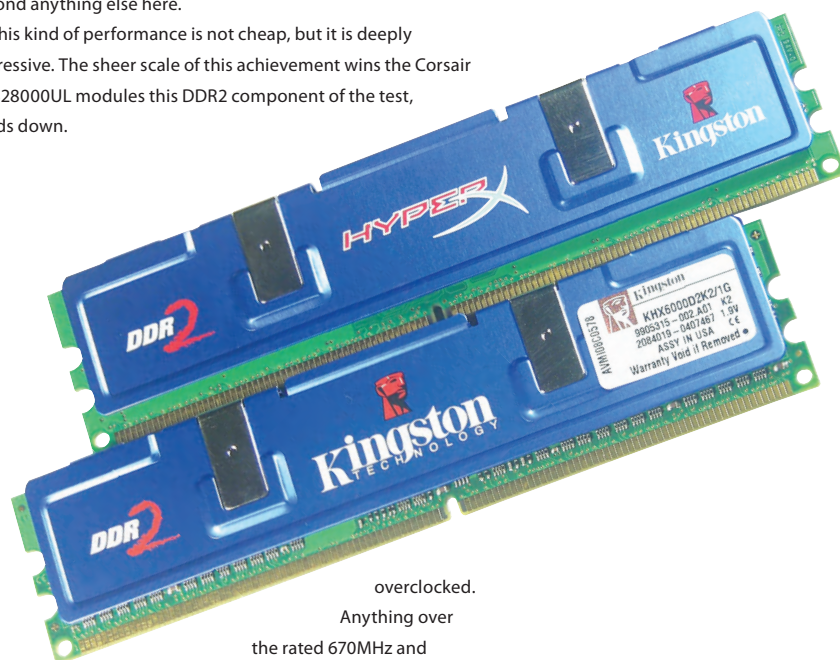
KINGSTON HYPERX PC5400

AS IZ JUST BARELY SLIPPED this one into our office under the deadline. In fact, we were testing these modules while compiling the rest of this roundup! These are Kingston's enthusiast-focussed parts, evident by the inclusion of the cheap-feeling but good-looking blue heatspreaders.

SPD default settings for this RAM were 5-5-5-15 at 670MHz. At these settings, the HyperX was fairly good, although its latency of 92.5ns was the slowest on test – which we found strange for gaming-focussed RAM. That said, it seemed to pull out a decent performance from somewhere despite this result, posting 5,208 in 3DMark06, and an average framerate of 166fps in the F.E.A.R. component of our testing.

Everest didn't seem to like this RAM at all – a read speed of 5,598MB/s and a write speed of 2,099MB/s were well below average. SiSoft seemed to agree, with the HyperX modules only managing an integer score of 4,878.

To compound these poor results, like the other Kingston DIMMs on test, these HyperX offerings flatly refused to be



overclocked. Anything over the rated 670MHz and the machine would not even POST anymore, regardless of any voltage adjustments. HyperX then snuck in at the last moment only to fall a bit flat. Not the best RAM for your gaming rig, to be frank.

CONCLUSION

AFTER ALL THIS EXHAUSTIVE testing and time spent changing, benching, and overclocking DIMM modules, we at last came to a definite conclusion.

The DDR versus DDR2 debate is rapidly moving to an end. This year, AMD will be supporting the newer memory format, and DDR will quickly become extinct once that happens. It's not that DDR2 is really that superior a technology, but it is the way the industry is moving thanks to promises of even more bandwidth once these DIMMs are running at over 1GHz in 'regular' systems.

Clearly, the performance potential is there at these monstrous frequencies, as demonstrated by the Corsair 8000UL modules. Although the latency is still high compared to DDR, those throughput numbers cannot be matched by the older parts, no matter how high you overclock them.

In the DDR component of our test, we were almost sure that the low-latency Corsair parts

would have the measure of every competitor, and to be brutally truthful, they really did. However, the performance of the Legend parts was unexpected, and really superb considering their bland appearance.

Moving to DDR2, and the Legend parts once more astonished. Those massive throughput numbers of the near-1,000MHz parts may have taken the headlines at the end of the day, but being able to push 'standard' DIMMs to almost 200MHz over their stock rated frequency is astounding, complete with the performance to match these stratospheric numbers.

For this reason, we have to give the Legend PC5400 parts the nod in this segment. The 8000ULs will outperform these modules when clocked to their fullest potential, but then you will have to pay quite a lot more money for the privilege of seeing such insane clock frequencies today. For bang for the buck, the Legend offering cannot be matched by this collection of RAM.

DDR RESULTS

| RAM | Timing | Everest Latency | Average F.E.A.R. FPS | sw/SiSoft Integer |
|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Corsair PC3200C2 | @ 2-3-3-6 400MHz | 50.4ns | 97fps | 2,980 |
| | @ 2.5-3-3-6 500MHz | 48.6ns | 100fps | 3,018 |
| Legend PC3200 | @ 3-2-3-8 400MHz | 58.9ns | 96fps | 2,614 |
| | @ 2.5-3-4-6 466MHz | 47.9ns | 101fps | 2,914 |
| KingMax PC3200 | @ 3-4-4-8 400MHz | 57.8ns | 92fps | 2,550 |
| | @ 2-3-3-6 400MHz | 55.6ns | 94fps | 2,622 |
| Hynix PC3200 | @ 3-3-3-8 400MHz | 58.3ns | 33fps | 2,745 |
| Dual channel | @ 3-3-3-8 400MHz | 58.3ns | 95fps | 4,598 |

DDR2 RESULTS

| RAM | Timing | Everest Latency | Average F.E.A.R. FPS | sw/SiSoft Integer |
|------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|----------------------|-------------------|
| Corsair XMS25400C4 | @ 4-4-4-12 670MHz | 84.9ns | 149fps | 4,962 |
| | @ 4-4-4-12 732MHz | 77.2ns | 141fps | 5,011 |
| Legend DDR25400 | @ 5-5-5-15 670MHz | 88.8ns | 162fps | 4,892 |
| | @ 5-5-5-15 860MHz | 72.0ns | 171fps | 5,344 |
| Corsair XMS25400 Pro | @ 5-5-5-15 670MHz | 88.9ns | 159fps | 4,948 |
| | @ 4-4-4-12 800MHz | 74.9ns | 165fps | 4,988 |
| KingMax DDR24200 | @ 4-4-4-12 533MHz | 89.8ns | 144fps | 4,832 |
| KingMax DDR25400 | @ 5-5-5-12 670MHz | 88.6ns | 149fps | 4,907 |
| Corsair XMS28000UL | @ 4-4-4-12 670MHz | 84.1ns | 169fps | 5,506 |
| | @ 4-4-4-9 980MHz | 72.0ns | 186fps | 6,190 |
| Kingston HyperX PC5400 | @ 5-5-5-15 670MHz | 92.5ns | 166fps | 4,878 |



Two Suits 120X Oriental Elite

NEW! PD 3 - USB Memory Stick
A-DATA, integrating the beauties of Chinese culture to portable storage device and introduces The Oriental Elite Chinese-style Pen Drive to the public.

USB Memory Stick
The World's First Smart USB Disk which is capable of showing personal ID and remaining capacity without battery embedded.

Good Design Award 2005

Fingerprint FP1
With the embedded sweep-type sensor, the latest diversification technology, AData "my flash" Fingerprint Disk brings you ultimate security.

Secure Digital & Compact Flash
The A-DATA Secure Digital Card™ is an audio and video consumer devices that meet the security, capacity, performance and environment requirements inherent in perfect solution for data, image multimedia file format storage.

USB Memory Drive RB15
The A-data USB Rubber disk is a removable flash disk drive with USB "High Speed" standard. Its special design and material allows A-data USB Rubber disk to have the product benefit of being waterproof.

DDR2 1066 Memory
A-DATA announces the Number-1 DDR2-1066 module (over 2 generations) which is the first one to achieve the dual-channel 1066Mb/s of DDR2 ultra speed in the world. This module configuration is by 32M x 8 (256Mbit) die, 8 pcs in 1 rank.

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LAZY GAMER'S GUIDE

GP2X

THE ORIGINAL GP32 BY GamePark made a big splash in South Korea, but remains relatively unknown throughout the rest of the world. The new GP2X will most likely follow a similar path.

"Powerful Personal Entertainment Player" is how the company describes the little handheld that runs on two AA batteries, though under the hood it certainly has a lot going for it. The open source nature of development for the GP2X has gathered it a bit of a cult following overseas and in indie-development circles – though nothing substantial has come of this yet.

Supplied by: www.gp2x.com

Internet: www.gp2x.com

RRP: \$189.99

Dual core CPU

The GP2X has a dual core 'ARM920T, ARM940T' embedded CPU, allowing the unit the power to do on-the-fly video decoding and music playback. These cores, when utilised fully, make the GP2X the most powerful handheld there is.

Video Playback

MPEG-4, XviD and DivX playback are natively supported at 720 x 480, and the GP2X even supports captions. The TFT LCD screen supports 260,000 colours.

Runs on Linux

Running on its own custom version of Linux, anyone can develop for the GP2X, which will hopefully give it longevity. The built-in 645MB of NAND flash memory is useful, and can be expanded with any SD Card that slots into the top.

Games

The onboard 2D accelerator gives the GP2X wonderful capacity for gaming, though not of the 3D variety. Some software-mode 3D games, such as Duke Nukem 3D and Quake, have been ported to the GP2X and run at full speed. Currently, game development for the GP2X seems a bit slow, but that's due to the open source nature of the OS.

Music

With support for all the popular formats, the GP2X (with LCD screen off) boasts a good seven to ten hours of music playback on its two AA batteries; though its larger size doesn't quite make it an iPod competitor.



Made for Serious Overclockers

Intelligent Overclocking Features Boosts the Performance Significantly for the Powerful Athlon 64 FX/X2/ and CrossFire Xpress 3200 Platform

With system resources easily drained while running 3D games, movies, or any other graphics intensive operations, along with taxing audio and memory performances, it is absolutely imperative to have a system that can both step up and be tuned up. And most importantly, overclockers take special pride and joy in doing so.

The ASUS A8R32-MVP Deluxe is tailor made specifically for that purpose. With supports to Athlon 64 FX and X2 processors, combined with CrossFire Xpress 3200 chipset, the intelligent overclocking features is capable of 60% and 35% enhancements in Hyper Transport and PCI Express. This virtually spells out the dream for all overclockers alike.

Flexible and precise tweaking for ultimate control

The A8R32-MVP Deluxe is created with the enthusiast and tweaker community in mind. It offers ways to raise system performance inch-by-inch and step-by-step to achieve maximum performance out of the processor, memory and system bus.

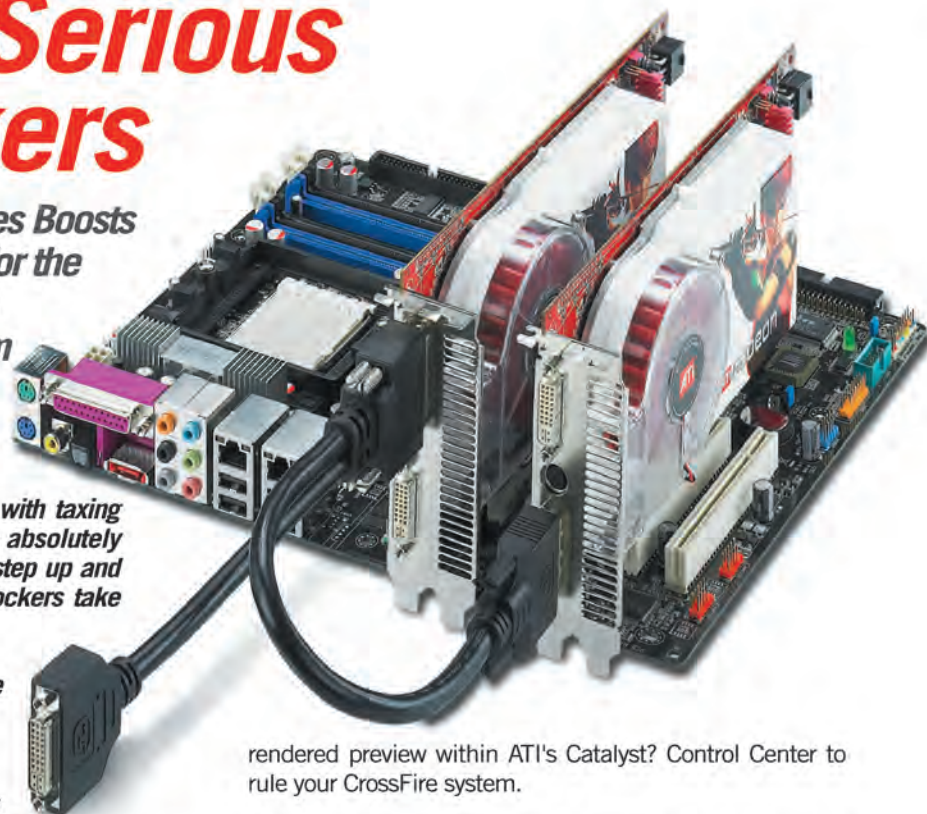
- 1** A 12-step DIMM voltage control is devised permitting the most suitable amount of power going into the memory modules.
- 2** The board lets you fine tune CPU voltage at 0.025 increments to find out exactly how much power is needed.
- 3** And last but not least is Stepless Frequency Selection (SFS), which allows both FSB tweaking from 200MHz to 400MHz, and PCI Express tuning from 100MHz to 150MHz at 1MHz increment each time.

PEG Link Mode - Boost GPU performance

This latest technology lets you to increase GPU and graphics card memory performances via the BIOS the same way system bus and memory bus are tweaked. It delivers excellent video quality on DX8 and DX9 applications while maintains system stability during high-speed graphics operation.

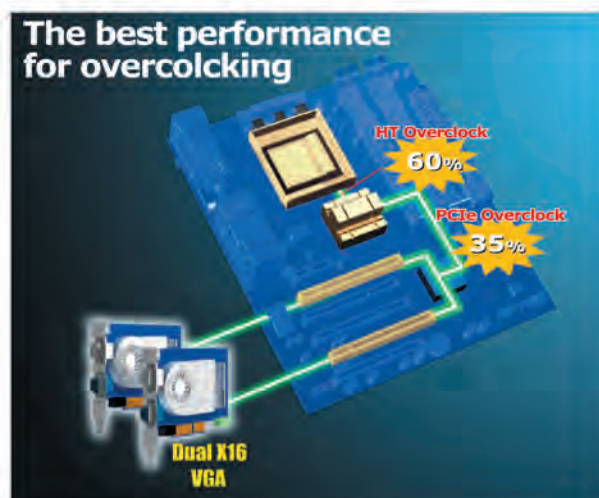
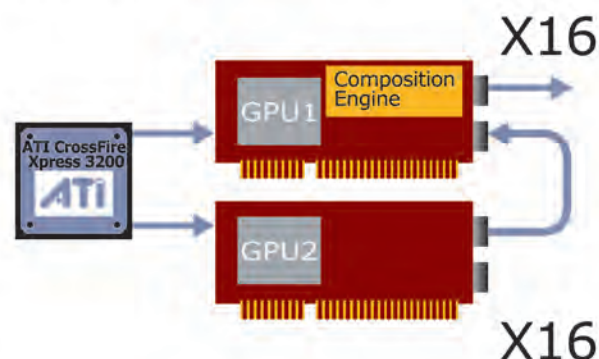
ATI CrossFire Technology

ATI's CrossFire boosts image quality along with rendering speed, eliminating the need to crank down screen resolutions to get the high image quality you want. CrossFire ignites with the higher antialiasing, anisotropic filtering, shading, and texture settings as desired. Adjust display configurations, experiment with advanced 3D settings, and check the effect with a real-time 3D-



rendered preview within ATI's Catalyst? Control Center to rule your CrossFire system.

If you are a true enthusiast or just an average tweaker trying to get the best performance out of the system, you should definitely go with the ASUS A8R32-MVP Deluxe. With industry-leading specifications and the detailed overclocking features to take its performance to the stratosphere, the A8R32-MVP Deluxe is made for overclockers.



Overclock HT by 60% and PCI Express x16 by 35%

ERGO PROXY

Speaking for those who cannot speak for themselves

NOT MANY PEOPLE KNOW this, but the French philosopher René Descartes* (1596-1650) is reputed to have travelled with an artificial female companion called Francine, named after his daughter. The relation between Descartes famously stating, "Cogito, ergo sum" otherwise known as "I think, therefore I am" and Geneon Entertainment's latest offering, Ergo Proxy (speaking in place of someone or something), runs deeper than first thought. Ironic?

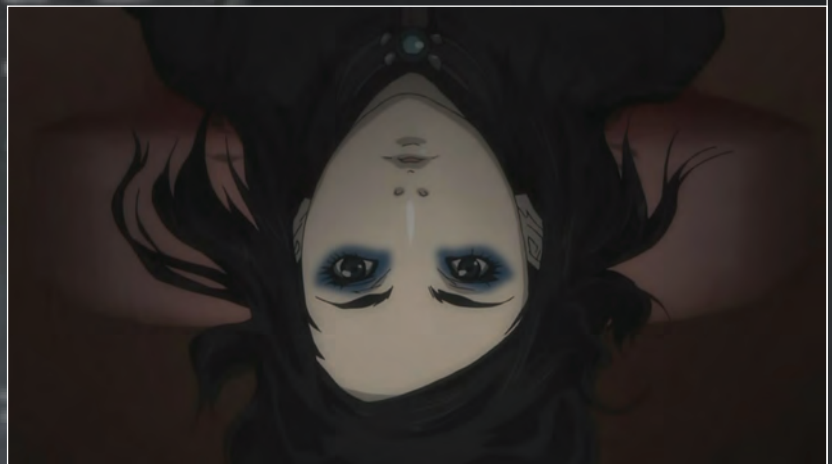
The domed city of Romudo is a utopia, a world where humans and autoraves (androids) live in harmony. The government runs a very controlled social structure to maintain harmony. Citizens are constantly bombarded with messages from the Citizen Information Bureau regarding their duties.

"Fellow citizens: do your part and make waste. Life is easier with lighter loads."

If you dull the average person's senses, the 'need to question' becomes inhibited. This raises the question: "Do we have to dull ourselves to live in a perfect world?" The ability to think or question oneself is a blessing and a curse. A blessing because intelligence (evolved to a point of awareness) allows a species to accelerate above others, and sometimes even the natural environment itself. But this 'ability' also has a flip side. The ability to question means that the possibility of a continuous existence of a utopia is virtually impossible, because all forms of order will eventually be questioned and thrown into chaos. And all chaos will eventually be replaced by order. Revolver infinitus - that is the way of the human social world.

The first crack in the perfect city of Romundo appears in the form of a secret project escaping confinement, the

* Descartes discarded perception as unreliable and instead admitted only deduction (reasoning) as a method of understanding the world.



second, a string of mysterious murders, and the third, a virus infecting the autoraves. The Citizen Information Bureau sends an investigations team led by a female inspector, Ril Mayer. She is accompanied by her autorave partner Iggy and is thrown headfirst into a series of conspiracies and government cover-ups. What they find is definitely more than what they bargained for. Ril and her partner have to catch a killer (who is not human or android), solve the riddle of the 'Awakening' and stop a mysterious virus, called 'Cogito', while trying to stay alive and deciding who to trust.

Ergo Proxy is an anime with loads of quality and style, with direction by Shukou Murase (Witch Hunter Robin, Street Fighter II: The Movie, Samurai Champloo) and scriptwriting by Dai Sato (Casshern - The Live Action Movie, Cowboy Bebop, Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex, Wolf's Rain). This classy anime doesn't just stop with superb visuals, which are on par with shows like Ghost in the Shell: Standalone Complex and Last Exile, but it also has a prime music line-up. The opening theme song, Paranoid Android (being used from episode 2 and onwards), was not specifically created for Ergo Proxy, but was taken from Radiohead's 1997 album Ok Computer. The band approved the use of the song after seeing the first episode of Ergo Proxy. If you prefer your stories in manga form, then you will be happy to hear that there will be a manga appearing later this year.

If you loved the boundary-pushing work of Nihei Tsutomu (BLAME!, NOISE) or the detailed sci-fi epics of Masumune Shirow (Appleseed, Ghost in the Shell), Ergo Proxy is something you might consider taking a closer look at. **NAG**

THE LONGEST YARD

Cast: Adam Sandler, Chris Rock, Burt Reynolds

Director: Peter Segal

Genre: Sport Comedy

Rating: 10L

A FOOTBALL PRO IS SENT to jail where the warden gets him to train a team of prisoners to take on the prison guards' team in an exhibition match. Soon the prisoners are eager to play, but mostly because it means they can legally bash the guards on the field.

The Movie: Adam Sandler takes a step back and makes a dryer compliment to the shenanigans of the prisoners. It's an over-the-top comedy and a nice twist on the usual 'underdog team' fare. Rock, as usual, is awesome, but the real stars are the prisoners, building up and executing a lot of jokes with slapstick precision. Sandler acts like his character in *The Wedding Singer* with calm, dry jokes, while the rest of the movie cast act like



prison football extras from *Happy Gilmore*. It works well, so if that sounds like your thing, grab one of Sandler's better movies in recent years.

The DVD: Apart from several languages, you can hold on and enjoy the official music video to the movie. If that's not enough, there are trailers of other movies you can watch. And if you still need more, you'll have to watch the movie again, because that's it.

CHICKEN LITTLE

Cast: Zach Braff, Adam West, Joan Cusack, Patrick Stewart

Director: Mark Dindal

Genre: Family Animation

Rating: A

THE SKY IS FALLING but nobody wants to believe poor Chicken Little. The more he tries to convince people that a piece of the sky fell on his head, the more they think Chicken Little is just making it up. Years pass, and the sky remains aloft. Until one day another piece hits Chicken Little on the head!

The Movie: Disney makes a triumphant return to animation, throwing out the traditional 2D animation and replacing it with 3D computer generated graphics, yet retaining the style and flair that made Disney animated films popular in the first place. Disney made a smart move in not punting the voice-actors, focusing instead on the fun, the funny and the warm visuals. Chicken Little makes continual pop references and movie spoofs, light-hearted without sexual jokes. The entire



ensemble works well, the cast of misfits taking centre stage and remaining there for the entire rollercoaster ride the movie takes you on.

The DVD: While not as jam-packed with extras as one would want (if you loved the movie), the deleted scenes, Easter eggs and various games and activities fill out the DVD enough. The alternate openings included are interesting, showing how the movie changed pace a few times before the final cut. For those who loved the songs in the movie, a Karaoke and Sing Along feature is sure to get you in the groove.



PARANOIA AGENT – VOL. 1 – ENTER LIL' SLUGGER

Genre: Suspense Anime

Age Rating: 15

The first four episodes of Satoshi Kon's groundbreaking anime series will be just enough to get you hooked, though with 26 in the series that entails getting a lot of DVDs. A mysterious assailant starts to attack people on the street with a baseball bat. This kick-starts a lot of situations with various characters in a show that is not what it appears to be. A must for *Serial Experiment Lain* fans.

Features: Nothing to write home about here, just some basic storyboards and an interview with the director. This is par for the course on an anime-series DVD, especially one broken down into four episode chunks.



I HEART HUCKABEES

Genre: Surreal comedy

Rating: 13LS

Not as clever as *Eternal Sunshine* and not as kinetic as *Being John Malkovich*, this movie is still its own force when it comes to 'meaning of life' comedy, mostly thanks to a top notch cast. Albert hires a pair of existential detectives to investigate a coincidence in his life. But this soon becomes something much bigger as he battles his nemesis, the sales executive Brad, allying with the nihilist fireman Tom.

Features: It's a packed disk if you enjoy the movie, packed with extra content like the Open Spaces public service announcements, the Huckabees Girl ads and a weird infomercial with the existential detectives.

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Moon Knight

Marvel Comics : R20.95

MOON KNIGHT IS BACK, though most readers won't recognize him. The character, which has been unfairly called a poor man's Batman, has been around since 1975 and represents the early edgy stuff from the Marvel stable. The original eventually came to an end with the death of Moon Knight. But Charlie Huston and David Finch have resurrected the character and seem to indicate a more mystical background than Marc Spector's mercenary skills. Solid art and an interesting premise to start with, Moon Knight is a good jump-in spot to revisit a classic character in a new series, even if you only found him now for the first time.



PVP

Dynamite entertainment
Image Comics R20.95

WHILE YOU CAN CATCH a piece of PVP goodness every day on the web, it's not the same as owning a piece that you can roll up and cram between the couch cushions. The ongoing comic series by Scott Kurtz are selections of the strips that appear online. The panels are printed vertically along the pages, so the comics don't feel crammed and small. In fact, it's even better than reading the online version and is perfect to keep lying around for casual reading. If you are a fan of the Dork Tower comics (another online spin-off), you'll love PVP.



Squee

R130.00

"BUY ME OR I'LL Die!" squeaks the basket case Squee. But can you blame him? His parents ignore him and see him as a burden. His teachers hate him. Everything that likes him seems to die. And his neighbour is none other than Johnny the Homicidal Maniac. Jhonon Vasquez strikes again with a collection of Squee comics, right up the alley for both Johnny and Invader Zim fans. The collection doesn't include Squee's first appearances in the JTHM comics, but there's more than enough to keep fans happy, plus a whack of Wobbly Headed Bob strips as well to keep things insane. If any of the names dropped here mean anything to you, you probably own it already.



Battle Royale

Tokyopop : R86.95

IF YOU ARE A fan of Japanese cinema (not Anime), then one badge that you inevitably have to add to your viewing collection is Battle Royale, the stunning thriller of students who have to fight to the death on a remote island. When a class wins a special lotto in Japan, instituted to combat growing delinquency, they quickly find out that they have to fight each other in a bizarre last-student-standing competition. The original Manga series explores the psychology behind the vents that this kick-starts in more depth; though the movie is an excellent piece of work, it doesn't match the depth of the complete comic collection. For mature audiences only.



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THE MOVIES — TAKING IT TO THE PEOPLE



WE CAN FIND A lot of flaws with Lionhead's *The Movies*, but when you look at it from a Machinima culture perspective, it's hard not to heap on the praise. The biggest testament to the impact the game could have on the future of game-rendered movies is evident from the official community (www.themoviesgame.com/community), which went over the 60,000 movies mark earlier this year. Not all of them are gems; in fact, the quantity over quality rule that is evident in all such online communities is alive and well. But the cream rises to the top, plus when you give enough people the right tools, they can produce some impressive work.

Taking the inherent limitations of *The Movies* in mind, because it is, after all, foremost a game, some of the top movies are very impressive. *Blackbird* is a long and detailed story about a suspended Hong Kong cop who is approached by a top cage fighter for a mysterious reason. It's a good example of how some people are using creative editing to get around the game's limitations. *Driver Man*, on the other hand, will remind you more of the terrible *The Movies* films we made and put on the cover DVD not too long ago, but only much better. *Hell on Earth* reveals one of the problems with the community: poor spelling and shaky dialogue are common, which keep the game's Machinima culture from being regarded as of importance equal to that of top-notch productions like *Red vs. Blue*. But taken in context it's an interesting story about humans surviving on an Earth overrun by demons.

The *Movies* community isn't exactly the stellar part of Machinima, but it definitely shows how the art form has reached a lot more people than before. Not everyone has game scripting knowledge and multiple machines for camera work, so it's the next best thing and shouldn't be sold short.



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GETTING THINGS MOVING

THIS MONTH WE'LL BE adding our golem and building the tiles we'll use to control it. We'll finally start seeing some gameplay emerging from all the setup work that we've been doing. After that, it'll be time to start working on some puzzle elements.

YET ANOTHER PROGRESS CHECK

'GOLEMMASTER_002.GM6' IS HIDING ON the cover DVD. It's as far as we got in the last article. Check your functionality against what 002 can do. You should be able to: (1) slide tiles off the board and have them stored in TileController, but only when there's a clear path to the edge for that tile; and (2) slide stored tiles onto the board, but only when there's something to stop them at the point you want to slide them to. Thanks to our tile selection states you shouldn't be able to do anything strange with the tiles. Feel free to stress-test and make sure things are stable.

As satisfying as creating nifty patterns with your tiles is, it's not really all that much fun. Let's make those tiles a little more meaningful.

ADDING DIFFERENT TYPES OF TILES

In the Golem Master Design document ('ahem', paragraph), we said that we wanted the tiles that the golem walked over to affect what it was doing. To do this we'll need some different tiles: (1) tiles to force the golem to start walking up, right, left and down on our board; (2) tiles to make the golem turn clockwise or anti-clockwise; and (3) any other tiles we can think of. What about a tile that forces the golem to punch whatever's on the square in front of it?

Thanks to Game Maker's parenting function, adding these new tiles is a breeze. First up, we'll want to create new Groups in our Objects tree for housekeeping reasons. Right click on 'Objects' and select 'Add Group' from the popup menu. [See **Image 1**]

We added two new groups: (1) a group to store objects related to Tile Control, which we dragged all the objects that deal with tile selection into; and (2) a group to store the Tiles we're going to create.

On the cover DVD you'll find 'Sprites.zip' which contains bitmaps that we'll use as sprites for new Tiles. You can always create your own sprites if you don't like the ones provided, but remember that we'll change all the graphics later anyway, so don't go overboard just yet. Create new sprites from 'tileUp.bmp', 'tileDown.bmp', 'tileRight.bmp', 'tileLeft.bmp', 'tileCW.bmp', 'tileCCW.bmp' and 'tilePunch.bmp'. Then create a new object in the Tiles group. Call it 'TileUp' and set its depth to 30. Make it solid, set its parent to Tile and have it use the 'tileUp' sprite.

To create the rest of our custom tiles, just use 'Duplicate' (from the object right click menu) to copy the new tile a couple of times and change the sprites to create 'TileDown', 'TileRight', 'TileLeft', 'TileCW', 'TileCCW' and 'TilePunch' as objects. Notice how none of these new tiles have any special logic. That's because they're set to use Tile as their parent, which means that all our other code will be able to use them perfectly without changing a thing. Go and place these new tiles in our TestRoom and see for yourself (remember to uncheck Delete underlying!). Now suddenly the order we pull and push tiles in matters - we've got the beginnings

of a puzzle! [See **Image 2**]

ENTER THE GOLEM

It's finally time to add our little protagonist to the party! In 'Sprites.zip' you'll find 'golem.bmp'. Load this as a new transparent sprite and create a new object called 'Golem' that uses it. We'll want to be able to let the player restart the level easily, so we'll use another state-based approach to make the Golem easy to reset. We'll use another object and call it 'GolemStart' to indicate the start position of our Golem. Create 'GolemStart', make it use the same sprite as the Golem and leave it at default depth (the same as Golem, 0). In GolemStart's 'Key Release' event for the spacebar, use 'If a variable has a value' ('Control+Tab') to test if 'visible' is true. Then make GolemStart 'create an instance of object' Golem at relative 0, 0, and finally use 'set the value of a variable' to make GolemStart invisible, i.e. set 'visible' to false. Place GolemStart on a GridEdge anywhere around the board. Don't place it on a corner though. Now when the user presses the spacebar and GolemStart is visible, it'll create a Golem wherever it is and make itself invisible, preventing more Golems from being created.

So, our Golem is now in the game, but it just sits there. We'll use our knowledge of the way the game board is set up to get it moving. The Golem will have been created on a GridEdge. This means that there will be Floor objects in the direction of the board and nothing in the other direction. In Golem's 'Create event set variable' nearestFloor 'to instance_nearest(x, y, Floor)' to get a reference to the closest Floor object. We can use this reference to get the Golem moving by using 'set direction and speed of motion' with direction = 'point_direction(x, y, nearestFloor.x, nearestFloor.y)' and speed = 2. When we run the game now we can move tiles around and hit the spacebar to make the Golem launch itself over the board and off the screen. Next comes tile interaction.

TILES UNDERFOOT

Because our Golem is moving every step, it makes sense to check what tile it's over in the 'Step' event. The tile that is under the Golem only matters when the Golem is directly above it, which is why the Golem's speed is 2 (2 is a factor of 32, so it'll never 'miss' a tile). Using 'if instance is aligned with grid' (32, 32) lets us ignore this test in steps where the Golem isn't directly on top of a tile. After 'starting a block' it's time to find out what type of tile lies underneath our Golem - 'if there is an object at position' ('Control+Tab') is exactly what we need. First we test if there is a TileUp at position (relative 0, 0) and immediately afterwards 'set the value of variable' direction to 90 - this will make the Golem travel upwards on the screen if it's over a TileUp. If we're over a TileDown, direction must be 270. TileRight means direction is 0, and TileLeft sets direction to 180. If we're over a TileCW, we have to subtract 90 from the direction so we set it to relative -90. TileCCW sets direction to relative 90 so that it turns the Golem counter-clockwise... After you've added all these ifs and direction

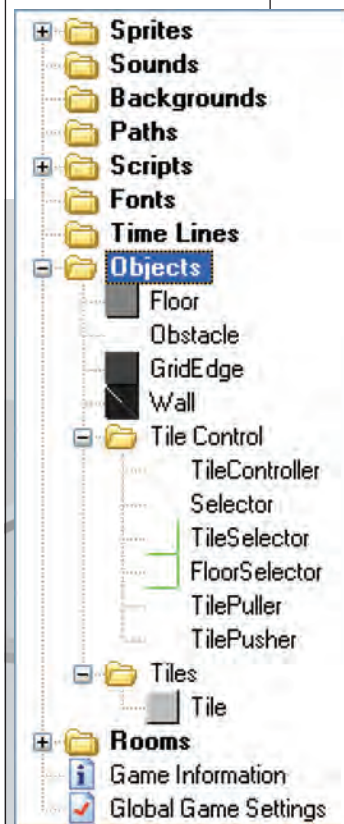


Image 1

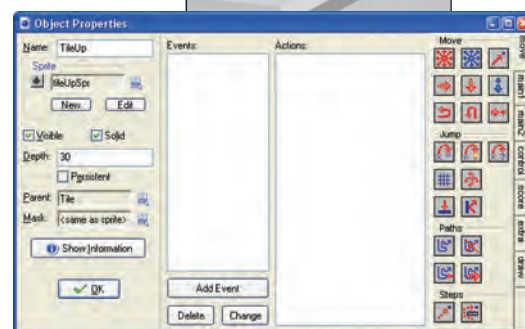


Image 2

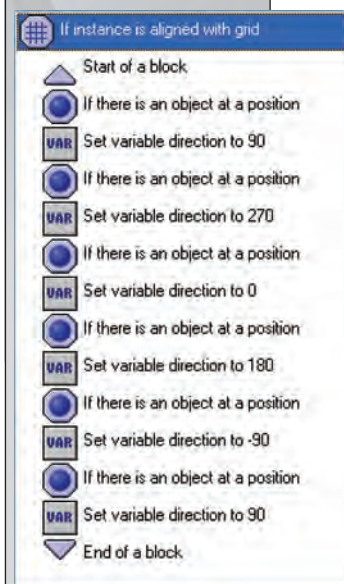


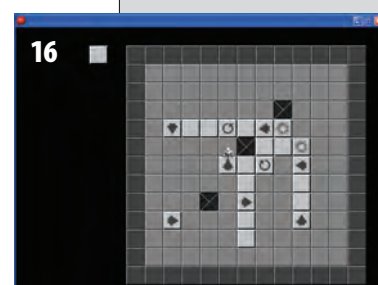
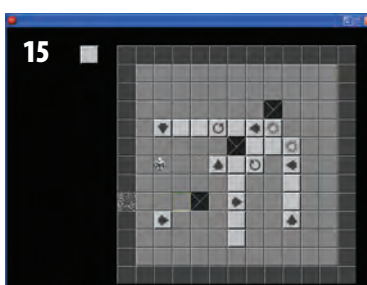
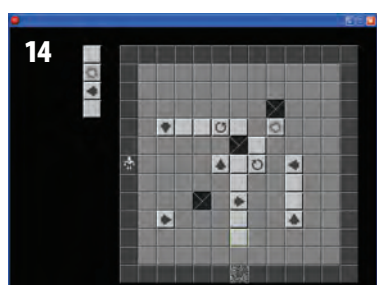
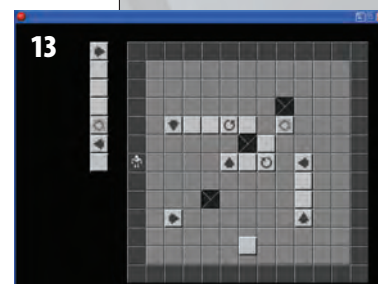
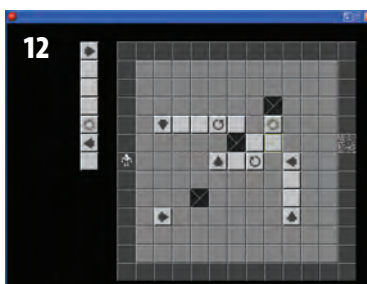
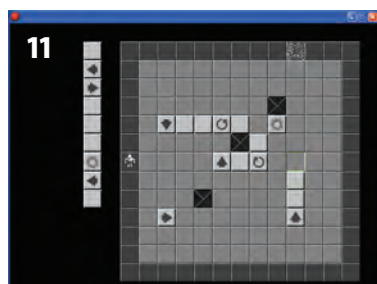
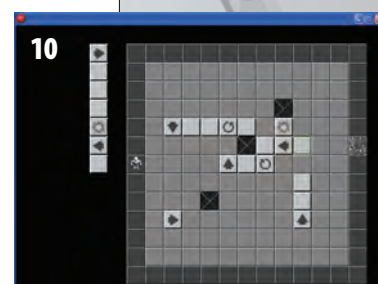
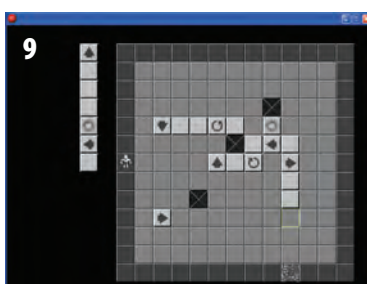
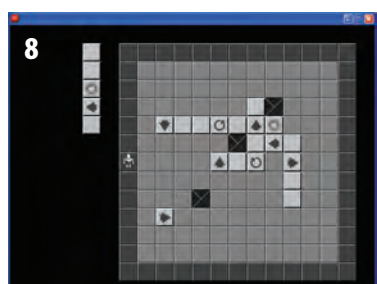
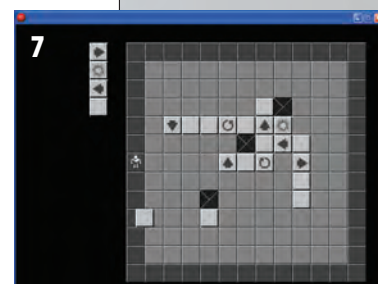
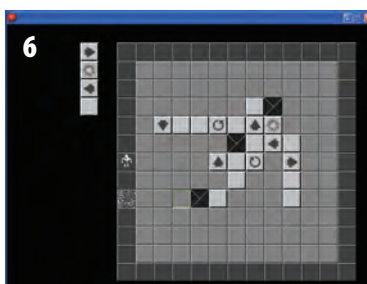
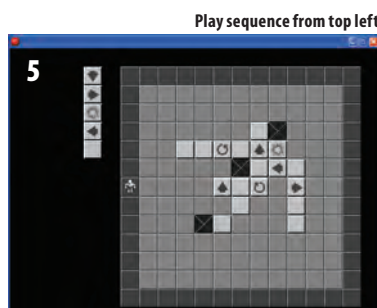
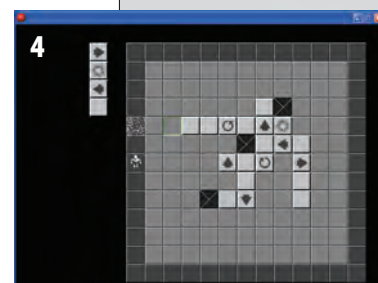
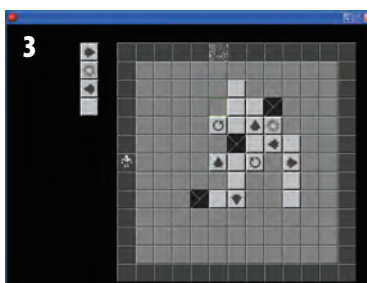
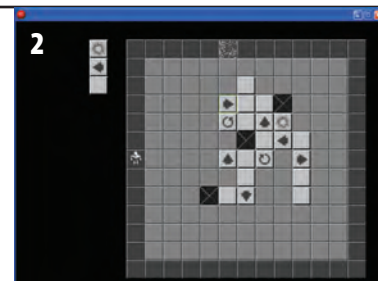
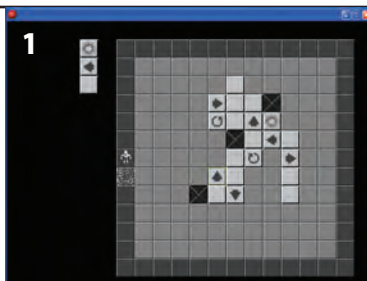
Image 3

changes, 'end the block' and you should be looking at something like the image. [See **Image 3**]

For now we'll be ignoring what happens when the Golem is over a TilePunch, which will come later once we've got enemies. There's one last thing we need to handle before we're done here though. If the tiles are badly placed, the Golem can go right off the screen. This isn't good... Use the 'Other->Outside Room' event to destroy the Golem and 'set the value of' GolemStart.visible to true so that another Golem can be spawned.

GETTING THERE...

The game is starting to take shape now, despite not having a goal or much difficulty in the planning that needs to be done. The systems that we built are starting to prove their worth, and hopefully some of the more cryptic earlier decisions are making sense at last. Parenting should be starting to look like 'A Good Idea™' in your own games... Next month we'll start adding puzzles to the game and give the player something to aim at. **NAG**



SO WHAT'S NEXT?

INDEPENDENT OR INDIE-GAMES ARE COMPLETELY DIFFERENT BEASTS TO TRIPLE-A GAMES. THEY'RE MUCH WILDER, LESS CERTAIN AND MORE DIVERSE OUT THERE ON THE FRINGE OF THE GAMES INDUSTRY, AND THEIR LIFE-CYCLES REFLECT THIS BY BEING LESS CLEAR-CUT AND WELL STRUCTURED.

FIRST COMES FEEDBACK

YOU'LL WANT TO FIND out what other people think of your game, and we're not talking about what your friends who have been watching over your shoulder think. You need the opinions of unbiased people who haven't seen the game in development. Your best bet is to get involved in an online community or two, either one focusing on game development, or better yet, one that's relevant to your game's target audience.

Once you've made a version of the game available to that community or a group of Beta testers (don't worry about the game being 'leaked' at this point, it's going to change quite a lot before we're done here), you'll have to anticipate problems. This is the hardest part of game development, which is why so many people 'finish' a game or two and then leave them sitting on their PCs, never to see the light of day.

People will have problems running your game on their hardware, they will have problems with saving and loading, the menus will be counter-intuitive and they'll uncover crashes and bugs that you never even thought existed. There are two ways to look at this: either they're ripping your game apart and taking you down because they totally hate you; or they're trying to help you sort out as many bugs and issues as possible so that your game can be even better. The truth is that if they keep giving you problem after problem, they must be enjoying the game and seeing that it has potential, otherwise they wouldn't be playing it so much!

As the game developer, it's your responsibility to get to the bottom of each niggle or issue that you hear about. Some things like crashes and show-stopping bugs are relatively easy to deal with. There's not much you can do besides track them down and fix them. Other issues, like people complaining about menu layout or the control system, are slightly harder to sort out. In general, people are bringing up issues that broke their immersion in the game, so it's best to try to look slightly deeper than "The upgrade menu doesn't make sense!" and think about what makes that particular menu confusing, then do something about it. There are very, very few issues that you as the designer can safely ignore. Those are usually the ones that contradict something in your design document. Even then it might be a good idea to spend some time trying to get to the bottom of the problem. If someone complains that a certain weapon isn't powerful enough, but you know that you've calculated the damage it deals and it's perfectly balanced, try giving it a beefier sound effect to give the impression that it's more bad-ass. The general rule for feedback is: be courteous and take note of problems, but the less specific the problem, the more you should reconsider the solution people offer.

GETTING OUT THERE

The feedback and polishing process is iterative and can take a considerable amount of time. As long as you don't get discouraged (it helps to keep an old version of your game around so that you can compare how much it has improved thanks to all this effort), you'll reach a point where the people testing your game will say that it's ready and your list of bugs is non-existent (hey, we can dream, can't we?).

You'll need a Website to promote your game and somewhere to send people when they have questions. Finding a good Web host and making sure that your page is designed well is far too



much to go into right now, but remember this: it's not worth trying to find a free service. You can get a great package for about R40 a month. Free servers always have strings attached somewhere, and if you believe in your game, R40 isn't a lot.

As far as the site itself goes there are a few general things you need. Show your game up front and make it appealing. Use easy to read text with simple messages and have lots of colourful, exciting screenshots. You don't want to force people to click through even a single menu to see what your game looks like - you'll lose far too many eyeballs that way! You'll need a FAQ section as well as a support area to deal with common problems. You need to have a section that allows people to contact you so they can tell you how much they enjoyed your game. The download link for your game is the most important part of your site. Make it big, bold and easy to spot. Don't use a download service that takes people to another site. That'll only confuse things.

The rest of the site is pretty much up to you, but don't do anything that might obscure the reason the site is there - your game. Fine, if you've got more than one game provide short blurbs with screenshots about each of them on your main page and give each game its own dedicated page, but don't ever hide your games. Using a Content Management System (CMS) is a good idea, but please don't be another vanilla nuke site. You really don't need a forum until you have hundreds of hits a day. If you use marquee or blink tags, we'll organise a pitchfork-wielding mob to hunt you down! Remember that your site needs to be kept as simple as possible so that you don't get distracted from your goal: getting your game on people's PCs.

...ON PEOPLE'S MACHINES

Once someone has downloaded your game, they're already sold on the concept. You need to get them playing as fast as possible. While a game is in the testing stages people will be getting new versions all the time, and they won't want to deal with the hassle of an installer every time. Distributing your game as a ZIP file is great for people who are up to speed on PCs. Installers are only there for people who aren't geeks, so that they have something to hold their hand. You need to let people choose if they want the zipped version or an installer version when they download the game.

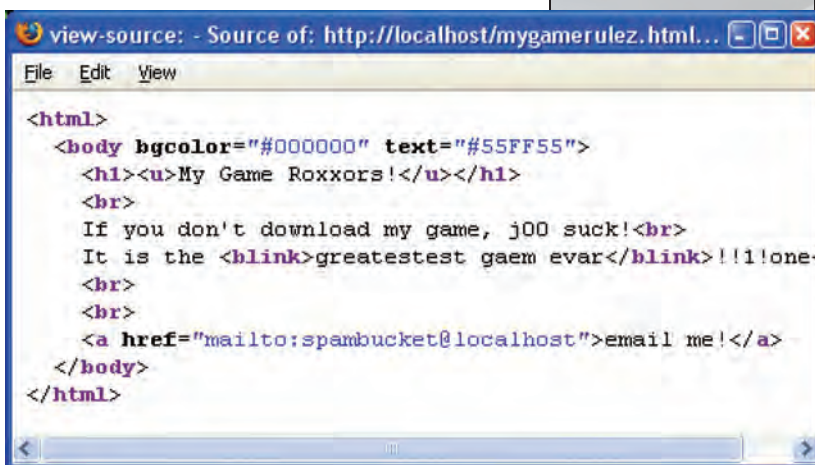
If you use an installer, remember to give the user choices. Don't force them to have a desktop icon or a quick-launch shortcut if they don't want one. Let the user put your game where they want it, not where you want it. Always have an uninstall option in your start-menu entry. If your game needs extra services like DirectX, let the user cancel the installation if they want to. And never ever have something run when the computer starts up, that's just bad form.

There are other general things to keep in mind when your game is running on somebody else's hardware. Always behave nicely. Don't do nasty things like setting your thread priority too high and starving everything else that might be running. Never store anything in 'My Documents'! Your game should always be self-contained in the folder it was placed in - there's no good reason to do anything else.

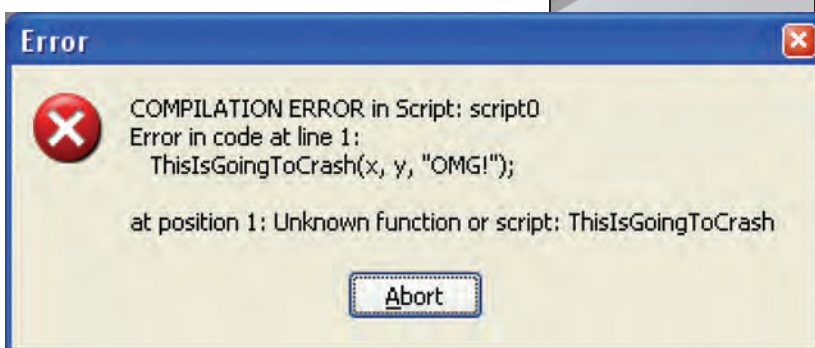
The last part to remember is that you need to have somewhere in your game where your Website is visible. People won't remember where they got the game from if they have a problem, or when they want to check for a new version. Give your game a splash or exit page with your contact details and your URL! **NAG**



Installers aren't always as friendly as you may think



Don't do this



Well, it crashed.

DEV.MAG

THIS MONTH, YOU'RE GETTING a lot more game development bang for your buck, thanks to the enthusiastic people on the Game.Dev forum at www.nag.co.za. They've put together a free online magazine focusing on game development for pros and beginners alike. Grab Dev.Mag off the cover DVD and spread it around!

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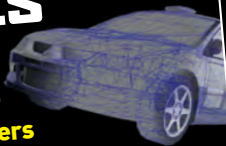
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MULTIPLAYER

UBERLAN ROCKS KZN

SINCE THE DAWN OF LANing in South Africa, Durban and the surrounding areas have been the least active on the scene. Aside from qualifiers held for Worfaire in 2002 and the World Cyber Games in 2003, the region has seen no large tournaments or, for that matter, any regular LANs of the scale of Mayhem (Johannesburg), Carnage (Cape Town) or MPLD (Pretoria). But this state of affairs seems set to change. Enter Uberlan, the project of a group of Durban gamers including Paul 'Vetoll' Fairbank, one of the country's top Warcraft III players. Their mission: to end the gaming drought of the East Coast. The first Uberlan was held a little over a year ago, and since then, four events later, the organisation has grown into a highly-professional, national-sized outfit.

On the weekend of the 31st of March 2006, the largest and most successful Uberlan was held at Gateway Shopping Centre in Umhlanga. Sponsored by Sony Ericsson, Axiz, Rectron and Dimension Data, the event hosted 235 players from across the country and catered for a variety of games, both competitive and casual. Of these, the highlights were surely the Quake 4 and Defence of the Ancients (DotA) tournaments, boasting over R20,000 in combined prizes. More impressive still, the prizes were all handed out at the prize-giving – something which has become disturbingly rare in recent times.

A landmark occasion for the local community, the DotA tournament featured a total of sixteen teams, including top teams from Durban, Johannesburg and Cape Town. Through partnerships with Carnage LAN and HashGaming, two regional qualifiers had previously been held and the winners provided with paid travel and accommodation for the Uberlan finals. Former Warcraft III champions Nightfall (home of big names such as Swoop, Cavalier and Zick) had qualified in Johannesburg, while Extreme Playerz had taken the honours in Cape Town. Durban's hope rested on Own3d, Vetoll's own team.

Strong performances from Nightfall saw them dominating the upper bracket of the tournament, while the other two were knocked down to the lower bracket. Meeting in the lower final, Owned managed to put an end to the Extreme Playerz and moved on to play Nightfall in the grand final. In an hour-and-a-half thriller, the match ended one game all, with both teams winning their halves as Sentinel. The overall victory had to be decided by points, and it was ultimately Nightfall who came out on top. For their efforts, the team received R10,000 in cash. As the runners-up, each member of Own3d received a GeForce graphics card and a DVD writer.

In the twenty-two player Quake 4 competition, Durban's favourite son, Mark 'Lazarith' Fairbank, breezed through without much resistance. The only games which he won by less than sixty frags were played in the final – against his practice partner Richard 'n00mz' Shuttleworth from Pietermaritzburg. After

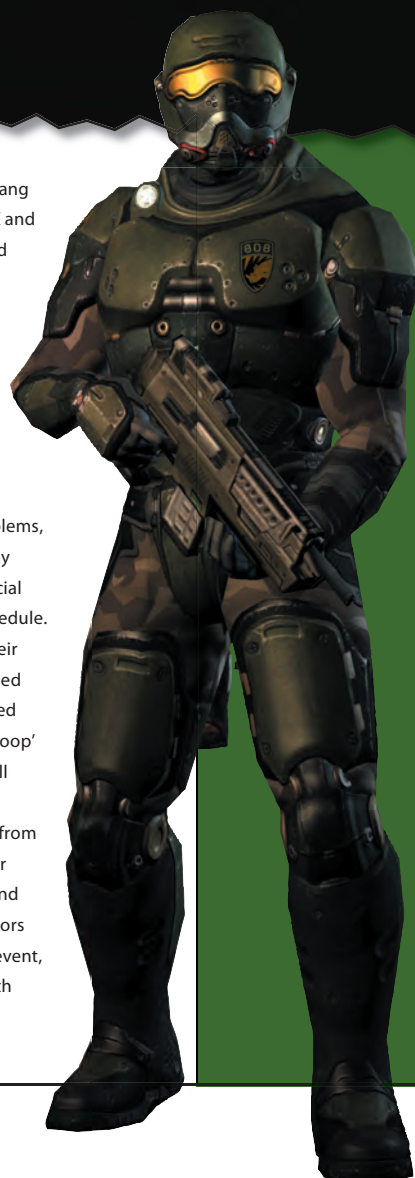


winning the maps Lost Fleet (24-14) and Galang (42-4), Lazarith claimed a GeForce 7800 GTX and a Sony Ericsson W800i cellphone. For second place, n00mz received a Gigabyte PC case and a Creative surround sound speaker set. A special mention must also be made of the fourth-place finisher, Killer, who competed despite being deaf. It is extremely difficult to play without sound in Quake 4, which renders his achievement all the more remarkable.

Uberlan was not entirely without its problems, of course. Power failures dogged the first day of the event, and as a result, both of the official tournaments were forced to run behind schedule. However, the organisers soon brought in their own electrician, and the problem was rectified before it could spoil the weekend. "We played the DotA final at like 2:30AM," said Chris 'Swoop' Barter of team Nightfall. "It was death, but all worth it in the end."

The general consensus amongst gamers from Kwazulu-Natal is that Uberlan is their answer to the LAN culture that pervades Gauteng and the Western Cape. With backing from sponsors and experienced management behind the event, Uberlan looks to become a mainstay in South African gaming.

[www.uberlan.co.za]





TRANS-ATLANTIC SHOWDOWN: AMERICANS TURN THE TABLES

IT'S A RIVALRY THAT has existed since the early days of Fatal1ty versus Lakerman; Nip versus X3. In competitive gaming, America and Europe have always been at each others throats. The question of which is the better continent has been speculated upon at length, and each year it has been answered only through subjective opinions. For 2006, however, the Global Gaming League decided to put an end to the guesswork.

To do this, they partnered with Clanbase, the organisation responsible for Europe's most prestigious online league - Eurocup. The Eurocup has been around since the late 1990s, and it was on this example that GGL had modelled its own Americup, now just having finished its second season. GGL's plan was to bring the top two finishers of both leagues in each game type together, to decide the strongest community. Naturally, this promoted large amounts of smack talk across the Atlantic, with both sides boasting of their imminent victory. But after their humiliation just three months ago at CPL Winter, most agreed that the Americans were the underdogs.

The Trans-Atlantic Finals were held in New York City and fought out in four categories: Counter-Strike 1.6, Quake 4 1 vs.1, Quake 4 Team Deathmatch and Warcraft III 2 vs.2. The European corner looked significantly more powerful on paper, with several world champions across all four game types. These included Mousesports, the top-earning Counter-Strike team of 2005, Anton 'Cooler'

Singov, winner of CPL winter Quake 4, and Manuel 'Grubby' Shenkhuizen, multiple ESWC and WCG champion in Warcraft III. The Americans, by contrast, had only ESWC 2005 Counter-Strike winners Complexity to brag about.

However, the first sign that things were not going according to plan for the Europeans was Michael 'Winz' Bignet's loss to the USA's Jared 'Cha0t1c' Cugno in the Quake 4 1 vs. 1 consolation finals. Winz was expected to have a relatively easy match, but ended up falling two maps to one. In the grand final which followed, the obvious European favourite, Cooler, was pulverised by the USA's Jason 'Socrates' Sylka in a match that is already being slated as a classic. Counter-Strike was in turn dominated by the Americans, who won both the grand and consolation finals.

Some pride for Europe was regained by the Quake 4 TDM team Ice Climbers, who continued to steamroll the competition, winning in straight maps. Meet Your Makers (Europe) and Four Kings (Europe) also won their Warcraft III matches with relative ease, forcing a draw between the continents in terms of first-place finishes. However, when taking third-place finishes into account, it was the Americans who pulled ahead in score, earning themselves a considerable boost in the international standing. There is no doubt, however, that the smack talk will continue until the next Trans-Atlantic Showdown. [showdown.ggl.com]

RESULTS:

COUNTER-STRIKE 1.6

1. Complexity (America)
2. Mousesports (Europe)
3. Team 3D (America)
4. Spirit of Amiga (Europe)

QUAKE 4 1 VS. 1

1. Jason 'Socrates' Sylka (America)
2. Anton 'Cooler' Singov (Europe)
3. Jared 'Cha0t1c' Cugno (America)
4. Michael 'Winz' Bignet (Europe)

QUAKE 4 TDM

1. Ice Climbers (Europe)
2. Darkside (America)
3. Black Dragons (America)
4. Action Ligan (Europe)

WARCRAFT III 2 VS. 2

1. Meet Your Makers (Europe)
2. Revolutions Sports (America)
3. 4 Kings (Europe)
4. United 5 (America)



FIGHT NIGHT ROUND 3 DEMO

www.xbox.com/live

A LONG WITH AN XBOX 360 and a Live subscription come the ability to download Xbox 360 game demos. One such demo is Fight Night Round 3.

Unexpectedly, it has become quite a party favourite. The demo only allows two players to duke it out against each other, using two preset boxers.

Thanks to the Total Punch Control method, each punch a player throws is deliberate and immediate. Using the right analogue, you can hook, jab and uppercut left and right directly - no button-mashing here. Blocking and dodging works beautifully, especially since it has to be done manually and in the right 'quadrant'. A lower right jab needs to be blocked with a lower right block, or you can dodge out of the way.

Once players get into the groove of the game, they develop their own unique fighting styles. The game has no HUD, no health bars, just a detailed running commentary, and very visual feedback of every punch. Lips crack, jaws get bruised and eyes swell over. Blood even goes flying.



Boxing in a game has never felt this physical, especially between two players

If your boxer becomes punch-drunk, his eyes will become unfocused and his punches will fly wild.

The elation of a well-placed punch, combined with stunning visuals that show skin ripple under the impact, makes for an impressive game to play with friends, or to show friends. The deep combat system keeps them coming back.

ONLINE GAME SPOTLIGHT

www.rasterwerks.com/game/phosphor/beta1.htm

PHOSPHOR BY RASTERWERKS is a really interesting little online FPS (of the 100% free variety), created with Flash and Macromedia Director.

The game itself, while not visually amazing, has all the tucks, nips and trimmings you'd expect from a proper FPS. Playing a little like Quake mixed with Unreal Tournament, Phosphor has full bot support, key-bindings and even online and LAN play - all right there in the browser.

You can host servers, join other servers, as well as host a local game for a little in-office deathmatch. The best part? You don't have to download a game or install anything (other than Flash, naturally). The game itself weighs in at

about a 1MB download, not bad considering it contains one full level, with textures and sounds etc.

The guns are a bit light-and-fluffy, with no real meat behind them, but that is to be expected from such an indie-development.

Rasterwerks has yet to comment on what they plan to do with Phosphor, though we doubt that a fully-featured online FPS with single-player is on the cards. At most, some polish, tweaks and a few more levels might turn Phosphor into a fun FPS distraction when you're either not at your own PC, or just don't feel like playing Quake 4.





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R50 games (R20+R30) NB: Make sure you leave a space between the word tribe and the code

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R40 games (R20+R20)

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R30 games

R10 games

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GUILD WARS: FACTIONS

DEVELOPER: ArenaNet
PUBLISHER: PlayNC
RELEASE DATE: 28 April 2006
WEB: www.guildwars.com
SUPPLIER: Megarom [011] 239-2680

WHEN GUILD WARS WAS released early last year it turned heads. Striking visuals combined with pick-up-and-play gameplay hit home with the MMO market. What really sold Guild Wars though, was the lack of a monthly subscription fee. Analysts were confused. How could a MMORPG support itself without monthly income?

ArenaNet (ex-Battle.Net developers) is trying something different with its MMORPG. It developed the game to have low running costs. The servers and bandwidth, needed to host the world, are managed very efficiently. Since most of Guild Wars takes place inside instantiated zones, the servers don't need to keep track of a massive persistent world.

Part of the business model ArenaNet developed for Guild Wars, was one of regular stand-alone expansions. The first of these many expansions is Factions.

One doesn't require Guild Wars Prophecies (as the original has been dubbed) to play Factions. Stand-alone, Factions grants you access to the new player content and Player vs. Player servers. You can also create a character using any one of the previous classes, as well as the two new classes which are being introduced with Factions.

The 'Ritualist' and the 'Assassin', both new, will be playable in Prophecies if you have Factions. You can take your character between the two 'campaigns' if you want, and back and forth as long as you own both.

Aside from the new character classes, Factions introduces a new element of diplomacy with faction points. As you align yourself to one of the factions, your stance towards the other factions will respond in kind – feudal Player vs. Player wars are sure to be spurred on by this Red Team vs. Blue Team server-wide system. This will help expand the already impressive PvP user base Guild Wars enjoys, especially the professional competition-level component.

Both the Ritualist and the Assassin are major departures from the previous character classes, but mesh in nicely.

The Ritualist is basically a turret generator. He or she can summon spirits which are chained to their location, doling out damage either close-range or over a wide area. Some summons cast area-effect spells or aid in the regeneration of other summons. The Ritualist is not a direct combat class, preferring instead to stand aside and let a wall of fireball-throwing spirits do the dirty work.

The Assassin, on the other hand, borrows more



Two new character classes and expanded PvP support welcome new players in Factions



than just its namesake from the Diablo 2: Lord of Destruction expansion Assassin character class. By chaining attacks together, the Assassin can release a lethal barrage of damage, at the cost of much lower hit points and a weakness against magic. The Assassin 'spells' chain-link in a specific order, i.e. first tier attacks

allow second tier attacks to be 'cast', but only once the first tier has occurred. In this way, first, second, third and more tiers of attacks can be strung together – very effective at quickly taking down strong opponents. Another skill allows the Assassin to quickly teleport away from danger, lending supernatural quickness to an already nimble class.

These two new classes really mix things up for Guild Wars, adding necessary complexity and strategy to the Player vs. Player, while adding depth and variety to the standard questing content. The new content has been designed to take in mind the new classes, so situations may arise where having either an Assassin or Ritualist in your party will be required.

Factions will be in stores (and purchasable online) from 28 April 2006. **NAG**

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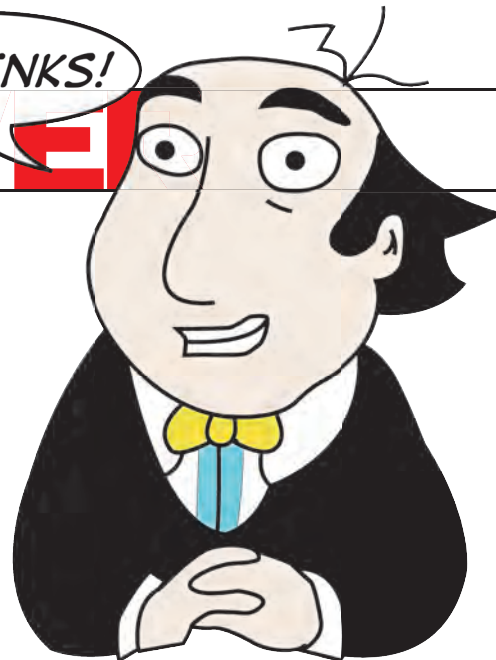
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EPILOGUE OUR OWN WORST CRITICS

"**C**REAM FLOATS TO THE TOP!" one part of the office might say. "So does something else," the rest would retort.

This causality has very little to do with how NAG gets produced, other than proving that we love arguing for no reason whatsoever. But truthfully, nothing is ever done without learning from it. Arguing for seemingly no reason actually just makes us better at examining points, cross-referencing facts and most of all, finding a viewpoint based on work, not just pure opinion. These viewpoints eventually influence the reviews, previews, features and more that you find in NAG.

By now you must have finished reading the April issue of NAG. Did you feel the energy? Did the magazine jump out at you, grab you by the collar and shout "Love me! I contain quality gaming stuff!?" It did? Well, then the hard work by the NAG staff paid off, and your gaming is now a 'Gaming of +1 to Gaming'.

But what if it didn't? It is that question that's currently driving the NAG team. We critically take a look at each issue we produce. We examine it, flip it over and approach it from all angles, trying to find what went wrong and what went right.

The April issue is no different. When the printed copies hit the NAG office, the first thing we did was to spot every mistake (no matter how minor), every error (no matter how grievous) and lamented about how it could have been better - much like artists who seem to be too critical of their own work. It seems that working for NAG involves a lot of self-criticism and always running the risk of becoming prima donnas. And you thought this was just about gaming! **NAG**

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publisher
tide media

managing editor
michael james
ed@nag.co.za
+27 83 409 8220

editor
james francis
james@nag.co.za

assistant editor
lauren das neves
lauren@nag.co.za

games editor
miktat dracon
miktat@nag.co.za

hardware editor
russell bennett
russell@nag.co.za

senior technical writer
regardt van der berg
regardt@nag.co.za

staff writers
alex jelagin
toby hudon

copy editor
nati de jager

contributors
adam liebman
a.j. kock
alan kent
anton lines
danny day
derek dela fuente
megan hughes
michael black
pierre van dyk
ryan kalis

group sales and marketing manager
len nery | len@nag.co.za
+27 84 594 9909

advertising sales
jacqui jacobs | jacqui@nag.co.za
+27 82 778 8439
dave gore | dave@nag.co.za
+27 82 829 1392
cheryl bassett | cheryl@nag.co.za
+27 72 322 9875

art director
chris bistline

designer
chris savides

junior designer
emma gernetzky

office assistant
paul ndebele

nag magazine
p o box 237
olivedale
2158
south africa
tel +27 11 704 2679
fax +27 11 704 4120

subscriptions department
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internet
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